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The Virgin
in Judgment

The Virgin in Judgment

By

Eden Phillpotts

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THE VIRGIN IN JUDGMENT

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

CREPUSCULE

NIGHT stirred behind the eastern hills, and a desert place burnt with fading splendour in the hour before sunset. The rolling miles of Ringmoor Down lay clad at this season in a wan integument of dead grass. Colourless as water, it simulated that element and reflected the tone of dawn or evening, sky or cloud ; now sulked ; now shone ; now marked the passage of the wind with waves of light.

Ringmoor extends near the west quarter of Dartmoor Forest like an ocean of alternate trough and mound, built by the breath of storms. This region, indeed, shares something with the restless resting-places of the sea ; and one may figure it as finally frozen into its present austerity by action of western winds that aforetime laboured without ceasing here on the bosom of a plastic earth. Only the primary forces model with such splendid economy of design, or present achievements so unadorned, yet so complete. The marvel of Ringmoor demanded unnumbered centuries of elemental collaboration before it spread, consummate and accomplished, under men's eyes. Rage of solar flame and fury of floods ; the systole and diastole of Earth's own mighty heart-beat ; the blast of inner fires, the rigour of age-long ice-caps—all have gone to mould this incarnate simplicity. Nor can Nature's achievement yet be gauged, for man himself must ascend to subtler perception before he shall gather the meaning of this moor.

The expanse is magnificently naked, yet sufficing ; it is absolutely featureless, but never poverty-stricken. To the confines of a river it extends, and ceases there ; yet that sudden wild uplifting of broken hills beyond ; their dark, rocky places, full of story ; their porphyry pinnacles and precipices haunted by the legends and the spirits of old, strike not so deeply into human sense as Ringmoor's vast monochrome fading slowly at the edge of

night; fading as a cloudless sky fades; as light fades on the eyes of the semi-blind; fading without one stock or stone or man or beast to break the inexorable tenor of its way.

Upon some souls, this huge monotony, thus mingling with the universal at eventide, casts fear; to others it is a manifestation precious as the presence of a friend; and for those whose working life brings them here, the waste's immensities at noon or night are one; its highways are their highways, and indifferently they move upon its bosom with the other ephemeral existences that haunt it. Yet by none of these people is Ringmoor truly felt or truly seen. Cultured minds weave pathetic fallacies and so pass by; while for the native this spot is first a grazing ground and last a recurrent incident of stern spaces to be compassed and recompassed on his own pilgrimage—to the young a weariness and to the old a grief.

Now light suffered a change. There was no detail to die, but a general fleeting radiance failed swiftly to the thick pallor that precedes darkness. Each perished grass-stem, of many millions that clad the waste, reflected the sky and paled its little lamp as the heavens paled. Then sobriety of dusk eliminated even the sweep and billow of the heath, and reduced all to a spectacle of withered and waning grey, that stretched formless, vague, vast, toward boundaries unseen.

It was at this stage in the unfolding phenomenon of night that life moved upon the void; a black, amorphous smudge crawled out of the gloom and crept tardily along. At length its form, as a double star seen through a telescope, divided and revealed a brace of animals, one of which staggered slowly on four legs, while the other went on two. A man led a horse by a halter; and the horse was old and black, bent, broken-kneed and worn out; while the man was also bent and ancient of his kind. Neither could travel very fast, and one was at the end of his life's journey, while the other had a small measure of years still assured.

Death thus moved across Ringmoor and trod a familiar rut in the wilderness; because, under the darkness eastward, was a bourn for beasts that had ceased to possess any living value. Through extinction only they served their masters for the last time and made profitable this final funeral march. The horse stopped, turned and seemed to ask a question with his eyes.

"Get on!" said the man. "There ban't much further for you to go."

The brute dragged towards peace and his hind hoofs struck sometimes and sounded the dull and dreary note of his own death bell; the old man sighed because he was very weary.

Then from the fringe of night sprang young life and met this forlorn procession. A tall girl appeared and three collie dogs galloped and circled about her. Noting the man, they ran up to him, barked, and wagged their tails in greeting.

"Be that anybody from Ditsworthy?" asked the traveller of the female shadow.

"'Tis I—Rhoda Bowden. I thought as you might be pretty tired and came to shorten your journey—that is, if you'm old Mr. Elford from Good-a-Meavy."

"I am the man, and never older than to-night."

He stopped and rubbed his leg. The girl stood over him by half a foot. She was tall and straight, but in the murk one could see no more than her outlines, her pale sunbonnet and a pale face under it.

"Have you got the money?" said the man.

"Yes—ten shillings."

She spoke slowly, with a voice uncommon deep for a young woman.

"Not twelve?"

"No."

The ancient made a sound that indicated disappointment and annoyance.

"And the price of the halter?"

"We don't want that. One of my brothers will bring it back to you next time they be down-along."

He handed her the rope and took a coin from her. Then he brought a little leathern purse from his breeches pocket and put the money into it.

"You're sure your faither didn't say twelve?"

"No."

"He's a hard man. Good night to you."

"'Tis the right price for a dead horse. Good night."

The ancient had no farewell word for his beast, and the companions of twelve years parted for ever. The girl took her way with the old horse; the man turned in his tracks moodily, chattering to himself.

"Warrener did ought to have give twelve," he said again and again as he went homewards. By furze banks and waste places and the confines of woods he passed, and then he stopped where a star twinkled above the gloomy summits of spruce firs. Beneath them there peered out a thatched cottage, but no light shone from its face. The patriarch entered with his frosty news, and almost instantly a female voice, shrill and full of trouble, struck upon the night.

"It did ought to have been twelve!"

Owls cried to each other across the forest and seemed to echo the lamentation.

CHAPTER II

WARREN HOUSE

A RIVER destined to name the greatest port in the west country, makes humble advent at Plym Head near the Beam of Cater in mid-Dartmoor. Westward under the Harter Tors and south by the Abbot's Way to Plym Steps the streamlet flows ; then she gathers volume and melody to enter a land of vanished men. By the lodges of the old stone people and amid monuments lifted in a neolithic age ; beside the graves of heroes and under the Hill of Giants, Plym passes and threads the rocky wilderness with silver. And then, suddenly, a modern dwelling lifts beside her—a building of stern aspect and most lonely site. Round about for miles the warrens of Ditsworthy extend, and countless thousands of the coney folk flourish. The district is tunnelled and tracked by them ; the characteristics of the heath are altered. For the turf, nibbled close at all seasons, shows no death, but spreads in a uniform and far-flung cloth of velvet, always close shorn and always green. Its texture may not be rivalled by any pasture known, and so fine has it become under this cropping of centuries that the very grass itself seems to have suffered dwarfing and reduction to a fairy-like tenuity of blade. Grey lichens are woven through the herbage here and there, and sometimes these silvery filigranes dominate the turf and create fair harmonies with the rosy ling in summer and the red brake-fern of the fall.

Inflexible Ringmoor approaches Ditsworthy on one side ; while beyond it roll the warrens. Shell Top and Pen Beacon are the highest adjacent peaks of the Moor ; and through the midst runs Plym with the solitary, stern Warren House lifted upon its northern bank.

A gnarled but lofty ash has defied the upland weather and grown to maturity above this dwelling. It rises wan in the sombre waste and towers above the squat homestead beneath it. Granite walls run round about, and the metropolis of the rabbits, with natural and artificial burrows, extends to the very confines of the building. A cabbage-plot and a croft or two complete man's work here ; while at nearer approach the house, that looked but

a spot seen upon such an immense stage, is found to be of considerable size. And this is well, because, at the date of these doings, it was called upon to hold a large family.

Fifty years ago Elias Bowden reigned at Ditsworthy, and with his wife, nine children, and ten dogs, lived an arduous, prosperous existence on the product of the warrens and other moorland industries. Rabbits were more valuable then than now, and Mr. Bowden received half a crown a couple, where his successors to-day can make but tenpence.

Elias and his boys and girls did the whole work of Ditsworthy. All had their duties and even the youngest children—twin sons now aged nine—were taught to make netting and help with the traps. There were six sons and three daughters in the family; and the males were called after mighty captains, because Elias loved valour above all virtues. Such friendships as happen in large families existed among the children, and the closest and keenest of these associations was that between the eldest boy and second girl. David Bowden was eight-and-twenty and Rhoda was twenty-one. A very unusual fraternity obtained between them, and the man's welfare meant far more to his sister than any other mundane interest. After David came Joshua, the master of the trappers, aged twenty-five; and he and the eldest girl, Sophia—a widow who had returned childless and moneyless to her home after two years of married life—were sworn friends. Then, a year younger than Rhoda, appeared Dorcas—a "sport" as Mr. Bowden called her, for she was the only red child he had gotten. The two boys, Napoleon and Wellington, aged thirteen and fifteen, shared the special regard of Dorcas; while the twins were mutually sufficing. One was called Samson and the other Richard—after the first English monarch of that name. Mrs. Bowden had lost three children in infancy, and deplored the fact to this day. When work at the warren pressed in autumn, and the family scarce found leisure to sleep, the mother of this flock might frequently be heard uttering a futile regret.

"If only my son Drake had been spared," she often cried at moments of stress; and this saying became so familiar among the people round about that, when a man or woman breathed some utterly vain aspiration, another would frequently cap it thus and say, "Ah, if only my son Drake had been spared!"

A distinguishing characteristic of this family was its taciturnity. The Bowdens wasted few words. Red Dorcas and her father, however, proved an exception to

this rule; for she chatted much; and he enjoyed a joke and could make and take one. Of his other girls, Rhoda was most silent. She, too, alone might claim beauty. Sophia was homely. She had a narrow, fowl-like face inherited from her mother; and Dorcas suffered from weak eyes; but Rhoda, in addition to her straight and splendid frame, was well favoured. Her features were large, but very regular; her contours were round without promise of future fatness; her nose and mouth were especially beautiful; but her chin was a little heavy. Rhoda's hair was pale brown and in a tone not specially attractive; but she possessed a great wealth of it; her feet and hands were large, yet finely modelled; her eyes had more than enough of virginal chill in their cool and pale grey depths. David somewhat resembled her. He was a clean-cut and sturdy man, standing his sister's height of five feet nine inches, and having a slow-featured face—handsome after a conventional type, yet lacking much expression or charm for the physiognomist. He shared his thoughts with Rhoda, but none else. Neither parent pretended to know much about him, but both understood that it would not be long before he left Ditsworthy. David was learned in sheep and ponies, and he proposed to begin life on his own account as a breeder of them. At present his work was with his father's sheep and cattle, for Elias ran stock on the moor. As for Rhoda, her duties lay with the dogs, and she usually had two or three galloping after her; while often she might be seen carrying squeaking, new-born puppies in her arms, while an anxious bitch, with drooping dugs, gazed up at the precious burden.

Sober-minded and busy were these folk. Elias had few illusions. In only one minor particular was he superstitious; he hated to see a white rabbit on the warrens. Brown and yellow, grey, and sometimes black, were the inhabitants of the great burrows, but it seldom happened that a white one was observed. Occasionally they appeared, however, and occasionally they were caught. Elias never permitted them to be killed. The master's lapse from rationality in this matter was respected, and if anybody ever saw a white rabbit, the incident was kept secret.

Enemies the warren had, and foxes took a generous toll; but the hunt recompensed Mr. Bowden for this inconvenience, although it was suspected that his estimates of loss were fanciful. Once the usual fees had been delayed by oversight, and Sir Guy Flamank, M.F.H. and Lord of

the Manor, was only reminded of his lapse on meeting Elias at "The Corner House," Sheepstor.

"Ah!" said the sportsman, "and how's Mr. Bowden faring? I've forgot Ditsworthy of late."

"Foxes haven't," was all the warrener replied. And yet a sight of the honeycombed and tunnelled miles of the burrows might have justified an opinion that all the foxes of Devonshire could have done no lasting hurt here. In legions the rabbits lived. They swarmed, leapt from under the foot, bobbed with twinkling of white scuts through the fern and heather, sat up, all ears, on every little knap and hillock, drummed with their pads upon the hollow ground, scurried away in scattered companies and simultaneously vanished down a hundred holes at sight of dog or man.

This, then, was the place and these were the people, animals and things that Plym encompassed with her growing volume before she thundered in many a cataract and shouting waterfall through the declivities beneath Dewerstone and left Dartmoor. Much beauty she brings to the lowlands; much beauty she finds there. The hanging woods are very fair; and the great shining reaches where the salmon lie; and those placid places where Plym draws down the grey and azure of the firmament and spreads it among the water-meadows. She flows through Bickleigh Vale and by Cann Quarry; she passes her own bridge, and anon, entering the waters of Laira, passes unmarked away to the salt blue sea; but she laves no scene more pregnant than these plains where the stone men sleep; she passes no monument heavier weighted with grandeur of eld than that titan menhir of Thrushelcombe by Ditsworthy, where, deep set in the prehistoric past, it stands sentinel over a hero's grave. Great beyond the common folk was he who won this memorial—a warrior and leader at the least; or perchance some prophet who wrought men's deeds into the gaunt beginnings of art and song, fired his clan to the battle with glorious fury, and welcomed them again with pæan of joy or dirge of mourning. But one chooses rather to think that these tumuli held ashes of the men who fought and conquered; who lifted their lodges to supremacy; who bulked as large in the eyes of the neoliths as their gravestones bulk in ours. The saga and the singer both are good; but deeds must first be done.

Of Plym also it may be said that nowhere in all its journey does it skirt a home of living men more sequestered and distinguished than the broad, low-roofed and granite-

walled Warren House of Ditsworthy. Notable and spacious mansions rise as the stream flows into civilization ; abodes, that have entered into history, lift their heads adjacent to its flood ; but none among them is so unique and distinctive ; and none at any period have sheltered a family more eager, strenuous and full of the strife and joy of living than Elias Bowden and his brood.

CHAPTER III

HARMONY IN RUSSET

SHEEPSTOR lies beneath the granite hill that names it like a lamb between a lion's paws. Chance never played artist to better purpose, for of the grey roofs and whitewashed walls that make this little village, there is scarcely one to be wished away. Cots and farm-buildings, byres and ricks cluster round about the church; a few conifers thrust dark spire and branch between the houses, and fields slope upward behind the hamlet to the shaggy fringes of the tor. A medley of autumnal orange and copper and brown now splashes the hills everywhere round about; and great beeches, that hem in the churchyard and bull-ring, echo the splendour of the time and spread one pall of radiant foliage on all the graves together. Behind the church, knee-deep in thick-set spinneys, ascends the giant bulk of Sheep's Tor, shouldering enormous from leagues of red brake-fern, like a ragged, grey dragon that lifts suddenly from its lair. The saddle of the hill falls westerly in a more gentle slope, and sunset paints wonderful pictures there; while beyond, breaking very blue through the haze of distance, Lether Tor and Sharp Tor's misty heights enclose the horizon.

A river runs through the village and at this noon hour in late November the brook made all the music to be heard; for not a sound rose but that of the murmuring water, and not any sight of conscious life was to be noted. Clear sunshine after rain beat upon the great hill; its ruddy pelt glowed like fire under the blue sky, and beneath the mass a church tower, whose ancient crockets burnt with red-gold lichens, sprang stiffly up. Sheepstor village might now be seen through a lattice of naked boughs, fair of form in their mingled reticulations and pale as silvery gauze against the sunlight. Their fretwork was touched to flame where yellow or scarlet leaves still clung and spattered the branches. Yet no particular opulence of colour was registered. All the tones remained delicate and tender. The village seen afar off, seemed painted with subdued greys, pale yellows and warm duns; but at approach its deserted street was proved a haunt for sunshine and glittered with reflected light and moisture.

One cottage near the lich-gate of the churchyard had served to challenge particular attention. The building was of stone, but little of the fabric save one chimney-stack appeared, for on the south side a huge ivy-tod overwhelmed all with shining green ; to the north a cotoneaster of uncommon proportions wrapped the house in a close embrace, covered the walls and spread over the roof also. Its dense, stiff sprays of dark foliage were laden with crimson berries ; they hung brilliantly over the white face of the cottage and made heavy brows for the door and windows. A leafless lilac stuck up pale branches on one side of the entrance ; stacks of dry fern stood on the other ; and these hues were carried to earth and echoed in higher notes by some buff Orpington fowls upon the roadway, and a red setter asleep at the cottage door. Over all this genial and spirited colour profound silence reigned ; and then the mystery of the deserted village was solved by sudden drone of organ music from the church. It happened to be Sunday, and most of those not engaged at kitchen fires were attending service.

At last, however, a human being appeared and a man came out from the cottage of cotoneasters with a metal pail in his hand. He wore Sunday black but had not yet donned his coat, and his shirt-sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. His fore-arms were somewhat slight, but hard and brown ; and his face had charmed any student of faces by its obvious kindness of heart and innate merriment of disposition. Bartley Crocker was thin and tall. He stood about six feet, yet weighed not quite eleven stone. He was, however, tough, and very energetic where it pleased him so to be. Small black whiskers clung beneath his ears, while the rest of his face was shorn. His upper lip was short, his mouth full and rather feeble, his colour clear and pale. His eyes were small, somewhat sly, and the home of laughter. He was five-and-twenty and lived with a widowed mother and a maiden aunt under the berried roof of the cottage. The Crockers kept cows and poultry, and Bartley was a good son to his mother, though not a good friend to himself. He had a mind, quick but not deep, and his feelings were keen but transitory. He belonged to the order of Esau, won wide friendship, yet woke a measure of impatience among reflecting people, in that he spent his time to such poor purpose and wasted an unusually good education and a splendid native gift of nervous energy on the sports of the field. He had, in fact, become a man without putting away childish things—an achievement as rare among rustics as it is common

under conditions of university education. Yet nobody but his mother ever blamed him to his face, and the tone of her voice always robbed her reproaches of the least forceful quality. She was proud of him ; she knew that the men could not quarrel with him and that the girls were all his friends.

Bartley filled a pail with water from the brook, and then carried it home. His mother was in church ; his aunt, Susan Saunders, prepared dinner. The man now completed his costume, put on a collar and a red tie, donned his coat and a soft felt "wide-awake" hat. He then went into the churchyard, sat upon a tomb exactly in front of the principal door, and there waited, without self-consciousness, for the congregation to emerge. Anon the people came—a stream of old men and maidens, women and children. Ancient beavers shone in the sun, plaid shawls covered aged shoulders ; there was greeting and clatter of tongues in the vernacular ; the young creatures, released from their futile imprisonment, ran hither and thither, and whooped and shouted—without apparent merriment, but simply in obedience to a natural call for swift movement of growing legs and arms and full inflation of lungs. The lively company streamed away and Bartley gave fifty of the folk "good morning." Some chid him for not attending the service. At last there came his mother. She resembled her son but little, and looked younger than her years. Nanny Crocker was more black than grey. She had dark brown eyes, a high-coloured face, a full bosom and a square, sturdy body, well moulded to display the enormous pattern of a red black and blue shawl. Beside her walked Mr. Charles Moses, the vicar's churchwarden—a married man with a grey beard and crystallized opinions, who on weekdays pursued the business of a shoemaker.

"Where's Margaret ?" asked young Crocker. But his mother could not answer him.

"I thought she'd have found me and prayed along with me, in the pew behind the font, that catches heat from the stove, where I always go winter time," explained Mrs. Crocker. "She never comed, however. Haven't she arrived home ?"

"No," said Bartley. "But 'twas a promise to dinner, and since there's no message, without doubt she's on the way. I'll up over Yellowmead and meet her."

His mother nodded and went forward, escorted by the shoemaker ; people in knots and strings thinned off by this gate and that ; then came forth the imposing company of the Bowdens, for Sheepstor was their parish, and wet

or fine, hot or cold, they weekly worshipped there. Only on rare occasions, when some fierce blizzard banked white drifts ten feet deep between Ditsworthy and the outer world, did Elias abstain and hold long services in the Warren House kitchen, lighted by the glare of the snow-blink from without.

To-day he came first, with his widowed daughter Sophia. Then followed David and Rhoda, Napoleon and Wellington, Samson and Richard, in the order named. Joshua was not present, as he had gone to spend the day with friends; and Dorcas kept at home to help her mother with dinner.

The Bowdens were well known to Bartley, and he bade them "good morning" in amiable fashion. He shook hands with Sophia and Rhoda, and nodded to Elias and David. None of the family showed particular pleasure in the young man's company, but this did not trouble him. Their way was his for a while, and therefore he walked beside David and Rhoda and prattled cheerfully now to one, now to the other.

"How those boys grow!" he said. "A brave couple and so like as a pair of tabby kittens. They'll go taller than you, David. You can see it by their long feet."

"Very like they will," said David.

The other's ruling instinct was to please. He addressed Rhoda. In common with most young men he admired her exceedingly; but the emotion was not returned. Rhoda seldom smiled upon men; yet, on the other hand, she never scowled at them. Her attitude was one of high indifference, and none saw much more than that; yet much more existed, and Rhoda's aloof posture, instead of concealing normal maiden interest in the opposite sex, as Bartley and other subtle students suspected, in reality hid a vague general aversion from it.

"If I may make bold to say so, Miss Rhoda, those feathers in your beautiful hat beat anything I've ever seen," declared Mr. Crocker.

"'Tis a foreign bird what used to be in a case," answered she. "The mould was getting over it, so I thought I'd use its wings for my hat afore they went to pieces."

"A very witty idea. And what might the bird be?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"I wonder, now, supposing I was to shoot a kingfisher, if you'd like him to put in your hat when this here bird be done for?"

"No, thank you."

"If she wants a kingfisher, I can get her one," said David.

Bartley tried again.

"I hear that yellow-bearded chap, the leat man, Simon Snell, be taking up with your Dorcas. That's great news, I do declare, if 'tis true."

A very faint tinge of colour touched Rhoda's cheeks.

"It isn't," she said.

"Ah, well—can't say I'm sorry. He's rather a dull dog—good as gold, but as tasteless as an egg without salt."

"Simon Snell can stand to work—that's something," said David, in his uncompromising way.

But Mr. Crocker ignored the allusion. He looked at and talked to Rhoda. The pleasure of seeing her beautiful face and of watching that little wave of rose-colour wax and wane in her cheeks, was worth her brother's snub. He had often been at the greatest difficulty to abstain from compliments to Rhoda; but there was that in her bearing and consistent reserve that frightened him and all others from personality. Even to praise her hat had required courage.

Elias called Rhoda, and Bartley was not sorry to reach the point where their ways parted. He went to meet a maiden of other clay than this. Yet Rhoda always excited a very lively emotion in the youth by virtue of her originality, handsome person and self-sufficing qualities. When any girl made it clear to Bartley that she took no sort of interest in him, the remarkable fact woke quite a contrary attitude to her in his own ardent spirit.

Where a row of stepping-stones crossed Sheepstor brook under avenues of beech-trees above the village, Bartley left the Bowdens with a final proposal of friendliness.

"Hounds meet at Cadworthy Bridge come Monday week. Hope I'll see you then, if not sooner, Miss Rhoda."

"Thank you, but I shan't go. Fox-hunting's naught to us."

"Well, good-bye, then," answered he. "I'm walking this way to meet Madge Stanbury from Coombeshead. She's coming to eat her dinner along with us."

A silence more than usually formidable followed the announcement, and it was now not Rhoda but David who appeared to be concerned. He frowned, and even snorted. Actual anger flashed from his eyes, but he turned them on his sister, not on Mr. Crocker.

Rhoda it was who spoke after a very lengthy peace.

"If that's so, there's no call for you to go over to Coombeshead after dinner, David. Belike Margaret Stanbury's forgot."

"I was axed to tea, and I shall go to tea," he answered

in a dogged and sulky voice. "We've no right to say she's forgot."

"That's true," Rhoda admitted.

Bartley wished them "good-bye" again and left them. He skipped over the stream and climbed the hill to Sheep's Tor's eastern slopes, while they went up through steep lanes, furze-brakes and stunted trees to the great tableland of the Moor.

Mr. Crocker once turned a moment; and, as he did so, he marked the Bowden clan plodding on in evident silence to Ditsworthy.

"Good God! 'tis like a funeral party after they've got rid of their dead," he thought.

Ten minutes later a dark spot on the heath increased, approached swiftly and turned into a woman. Such haste had she made that her heart throbbed almost painfully. She pressed her hands to it and could not speak for a little while. Her face was bright and revealed an eager but a very sensitive spirit. There was something restless and birdlike about her, and something unutterably sweet; for this girl's temper was woven of pure altruism. Welfare of others, by a sort of fine instinct, had long since become her welfare.

She was four-and-twenty, of good height and a dark complexion. Perhaps her boundless energy preserved her from growing stout and kept her as she was—a fine woman of ripe and flowing figure with a round, beautiful neck and noble arms. Her hair, parted down the middle in the old fashion, was black and without natural gloss; her eyebrows were full and perfect in shape and her eyes shone with the light of a large and sanguine heart. Her face was well shaped and her mouth very gentle. Margaret Stanbury possessed a temperament of fire. She made intuition serve for reason, and instinct take the place of logic. Her capacity both for joy and grief was unusual in her class.

"Whatever will your people say, Bartley?" she gasped. "They'll never forgive me, I'm sure."

"No bad news, I hope?"

"Yes, but there is. Mother scalded herself just as I was starting to church, so I had to stop and cook the dinner. And, what's far worse, I've kept you from yours."

"We'll soon make up for lost time," he answered. "I hope your mother suffered but little pain and will soon be well."

"She makes naught of it; but of course I couldn't leave her to mess about with a lame hand."

"Of course not; of course not. I wish you hadn't hurried so. You've set yourself all in a twitter."

Nevertheless he much admired the beautiful rise and fall of her tight Sunday frock. It was as pleasant a circumstance in its way as Rhoda's ghostly blush when he had mentioned Simon Snell.

CHAPTER IV

COOMBESHEAD

THE character of Margaret Stanbury affected very diversely those who came in contact with it. Her never-failing desire to be helping others was sometimes welcomed, sometimes tolerated, and sometimes resented. Most people have no objection to being spoiled, and mothers of sick children, old bedridden folk and invalids welcomed Margaret gladly enough, and accepted her gifts of service or food—sometimes as a privilege, sometimes, after a few repetitions, as a right. But others only endured her attentions for the love they bore her, and because they knew that she joyed to be with the careworn and suffering. A residue of independent people were indifferent to her. These wished her away, when she sought to share their tribulations or lessen their labours.

Nanny Crocker and her sister Susan belonged to the last category. They hated fuss and they mistrusted sympathy. They were complete in themselves—comfortable, superior, selfish. They liked Margaret Stanbury so much that they held her worthy of Bartley; and he liked her as well as a man might who had known her all his life. His mother had settled with Susan that her son was husband-old, and this visit from Madge might be said to open the campaign.

The old women took cold stock of her as she ate her dinner. To an outsider they had suggested two elderly lizards, with wrinkled skins and large experience, studying a song-thrush on a bough. Madge trilled and chirruped from the simple goodness of her heart; they, in their deeper shrewdness, listened; she had much to say of many people and not an unkind word of any; but unfailingly they qualified her generous estimate of fellow-creatures.

After the meal Margaret declared that she must start immediately for home to keep an appointment; and she took with her Bartley Crocker himself and an elaborate prescription for scalds. Then, when they had gone, Susan and Nanny discussed the girl without sentiment or imagination, yet not without common sense.

They differed somewhat, but not in the conclusion.

Both felt that though too prone to let her heart run away with her head, Madge would make a good wife for their man. The suspicion was that she might not be quite firm enough with him. That, however, appeared inevitable. Mrs. Crocker felt that Bartley must certainly be humoured. No woman born would ever deny him his own way or cloud his spirit with opposition. Susan feared that the girl had expensive tastes and an instinct which carried generosity to absurd lengths; but the mother of Bartley believed that once married, this lavish benevolence would centre upon Margaret's husband and find all necessary scope for its activity in that quarter.

Meantime Bartley's own attitude had to be considered, and upon that point his parent and his aunt were satisfied. He had been attentive to Margaret at dinner and more than usually polite.

"It only remains to see what the girl thinks," said Susan; but her sister held that problem determined.

"She goes without saying, I should fancy, even if Bartley was different to what he is. He's only to drop the handkerchief. The girl's no fool. Catch a Stanbury refusing a Crocker!"

"I doubt he'll ask her afore Christmas."

"May or may not. That's not our job. 'Tis for us to bid her here now and again, and I may even get out to Coombeshead presently and pay her mother a visit. Of course Mrs. Stanbury and her husband will be hot for it."

Thus, despite their large worldly wisdom and knowledge of their fellow-folk, these elderly sisters, cheered by Sunday dinner, took a rosy view of the future and held the things which they desired to happen as good as accomplished. They even debated upon a new home for Bartley and wondered where it had better be chosen.

The man meantime was moving at one point of that great trio of tors known hereabout as "the Triangle." The heights of Sheep's Tor, Lether Tor, and Down Tor are equidistant, and once upon a time, in the hollowed midst of them, Nature's hand held a lake. Then its granite barriers were swept away and the cup ran empty. Hereafter Meavy river flowed through the midst of meadows and, at the time of these incidents, continued to do so. It was not until nearly fifty years later that thirsty men rebuilt the cup to hold sweet water for their towns.

Across the river went Margaret and Bartley; then they turned and, by a detour, set their faces towards her home. Their talk was light and cheerful. It ranged

over many subjects, including love, but no note of any close, personal regard marked the conversation.

"What do you think of Rhoda Bowden?" he asked, and Margaret answered slowly.

"I think a lot of her. She's a solemn sort of girl and goeth so grand-like! She'm different to most of us—so tall and sweeping in her walk. Maidens mostly mince in their going; but she swingeth along like a man."

"She's a jolly fine girl, Madge."

"David be terrible fond of her."

"Yes, he is. I saw that this morning before dinner. And I got actually a touch of pink into her cheek to-day, if you'll believe it."

"You're that bowldacious always—enough to make any girl blush with your nonsense."

"Not at all. I wouldn't say anything outright—but I just mentioned Simon Snell of all men, and I'll swear Miss Rhoda flickered up!"

"You never know what natures catch heat from each other. I don't reckon Rhoda's fond of men."

"And surely Snell would never dare to be fond of girls."

"And yet, for just that reason, they might be drawn together."

By chance the man of whom they spoke appeared a little farther on their way. He was a large-boned, ox-eyed labourer, with a baby's face on adult shoulders. Not a wrinkle of thought, not a sensual line was ruled upon his round cheeks or brow. A yellow beard and moustache hid the lower part of his face. His skin was clear and high-coloured; his nose was thin; his forehead was high and narrow.

"Give you good afternoon," said Mr. Snell. He spoke in a thin, colourless voice and his face revealed no expression but a sort of ovine placidity.

Bartley winked at Madge.

"And how be all at Ditsworthy Warren House, Simon?" he asked.

"I was there last Thursday. They was all well then. I'm going there now to drink tea with——"

"With Miss Rhoda—eh? Or is it Miss Dorcas?"

The shadowy ghost of a smile touched Simon's mild face.

"What a dashing way you have of mentioning the females! I never could do it, I'm sure. 'Tis about some spaniel pups as I be going up over. Give you good afternoon."

He stalked away, calm, solemn, inane.

Mr. Snell was engaged upon the Plymouth water leat. His neighbours regarded him as a harmless joke. It might have been said of him, as of the owl, that he was not humorous himself, but the cause of humour in others.

"I always think there's a lot of sense hidden in Simon, for all you men laugh at him," said Margaret.

"Then give up thinking so," answered Bartley, "for you're wrong. That baby-eyed creature have just brain-power to keep him out of the lunatic asylum and no more. His head is as empty as a deaf nut. He's never growed up. There's naught behind that great bush of a beard but a stupid child. He's only the image of a man; and you'll never hear him say a sensible thing, unless 'tis the echo of somebody else. He don't know no more about human creatures than that gate."

"A childlike spirit have its own virtues. He'd never do a bad thing."

"He'd never do anything—good or bad. He's like a ploughing horse or a machine. Lord, the times I've tried to shock a swear or surprise a laugh out of that chap! Yet if ever Rhoda Bowden showed me a spark of herself, 'twas when I said I thought Simon was after her red sister."

"'Twas only because you angered her thinking of such a thing."

"How d'you like David Bowden?" he asked suddenly, and the question signified much to them both. For Bartley had been not a little astonished to hear that David was going to drink tea at Coombeshead. The eldest son of Elias was an unsociable man and little given to visiting. Yet this visit, as Mr. Crocker had observed after church, meant a good deal to young Bowden. Now he desired to know what it might mean to Margaret.

Her merry manner changed and a nervousness, natural to her and never far from the surface of her character, asserted itself.

"What a chap you are for sudden questions that go off like a rat-trap! Mr. David is coming to drink tea along with us to-night."

"That's why you're in such a hurry."

"Why not?"

"No reason at all. David Bowden's rather a grim sort of man; but he's got all the virtues except a gentle tongue. I speak better of him than he would of me, however."

"I'm sure not. He's never said a word against you that I ever heard."

"You've heard him pretty often then? Well, he despises me, Madge. Because I don't stick to work like

he does. Don't you get too fond of that man. He's a kill-joy."

She gasped and changed colour, but he did not notice it. All that Bartley had needed to turn his attention seriously to this girl was some spice of rivalry; and now it promised to appear. They walked along to Nosworthy Bridge, and from that spot Margaret's distant home was visible.

Like a picture set between two great masses of fruiting whitethorn, Dennycoombe spread eastward into Dartmoor and climbed upward through glory of sinking light upon autumnal colour. To the west Sheep's Tor's larch-clad shoulder sloped in pale gold mottled with green, while northerly Down Tor broke the withered fern. Between them lay a valley of lemon light washed with blue hazes and stained by great darkness where the shadows fell. Many a little dingle opened on either hand of the glen; and here twinkled water, where a brook leapt downward; and here shone dwindling raiment of beech and oak.

Coombeshead Farm, the home of the Stanburys, stood at the apex of this gorge and lay under Coombeshead Tor. Still higher against the sky rolled Eylesbarrow, its enormous and simple outline broken only by the fangs of an old ruin; while flying clouds, that shone in opposition to the sunset, crowned all with welter of mingled light and gloom. The modest farmhouse clung like a grey nest into the tawny harmonies of the hill, and above it rose blue smoke.

"You'll come to tea?" said Madge; but Bartley shook his head.

"Two's company, three's none," he said.

"But we're all at home."

"No, no; I've had my luck—mustn't be greedy. One thing I will swear: David Bowden won't make you laugh as often at your tea as I did at your dinner—will he now?"

"We've all got our different qualities."

"I tell you he's a kill-joy," repeated Bartley; but Margaret shook her head.

"Not to me—never to me," she said frankly.

This fearless confession reduced the man to silence. Then, while he considered the position and felt that, if he desired Margaret, the time for serious love-making had come, there approached the sturdy shape of young Bowden himself.

They were now more than half-way up the valley, and David had seen them long ago. He advanced to meet them, took no notice of Bartley, but shook Margaret's hand and spoke while he did so.

"It was ordained that I should drink a dish of tea along

with your people this afternoon; but if you've forgot it I can go again."

"No fay! Of course 'twasn't forgotten. Why ever should you think so, Mr. David?"

"Because Bartley here—however, I'm sorry I spoke, since 'tis as 'tis."

"Not often you say more than be needed in words," remarked Mr. Crocker. But he spoke mechanically. His observation was entirely bestowed upon Margaret's attitude towards Bowden. That she liked him was sufficiently clear. Her face was the brighter for his coming and she began to talk to him of certain interests not familiar to Bartley. Then she remembered herself and turned to the younger man again.

"But what's this to you, Bartley? Naught, I'm sure."

He had remarked that she addressed David by his Christian name, but with the affix of ceremony.

"Anything that interests you interests me, Madge," he answered. "But I'll leave you here and go back-along through the woods."

"Better come on, now you're so near, and have tea with us."

"What does David say?"

"Ban't my business," answered Mr. Bowden.

The men looked at each other straight in the eyes and grasped the situation. Then Bartley shook hands with Margaret and left them.

Bowden made no comment on Mr. Crocker. Indeed he did not speak at all until they had almost reached the homestead of Coombeshead. Then, suddenly, without preliminaries, he dragged a little, square-nosed spaniel puppy out of his pocket, where it had been lying fast asleep.

"'Tis weaned and ready to begin learning," he said. "Your brother Bart will soon teach it how to behave. But mind you let him. Don't you try to bring it up. You'll only spoil it. No woman I ever knowed, except Rhoda, could train a dog."

The little thing licked Madge's face while she kissed its nose.

"A dinky dear! Thank you, thank you, Mr. David. 'Twill be a great treasure to me."

He set his teeth and asked for a privilege. He had evidently meant to accompany this gift with a petition.

"And if I may make so bold, I want for you to call me 'David,' instead of 'Mr. David.'"

He looked at her almost sternly as he spoke. His voice was slow, deep and resonant.

"Of course—David."

He nodded and the shadow of a smile passed over his face.

"Thank you kindly," he said.

The pup occupied Margaret's attention and hid the flush upon her cheek. Then they entered together to find the rest of the Stanbury family sitting very patiently waiting for their tea.

Bartholomew Stanbury and his son, Bartholomew, were men of like instincts and outlook. Coombeshead Farm had but little land and the farmer was very poor; but father and son only grumbled in the privacy of the family circle and presented a sturdy and indifferent attitude to the world. They were tall, well-made men, flaxen of colour and scanty of hair. Their eyes were blue; their expressions were frank; their intelligence was small and their physical courage great. Save for the difference represented by thirty years of time, father and son could hardly have been more alike; but Bartholomew Stanbury, though little more than fifty, was already very bald and round in the shoulders; while "Bart," as the younger man was always called without addition, stood straight, and though his face was hairless, save for a thin moustache, a good sandy crop covered his poll.

Both men rose as Madge and David appeared; both wrinkled their narrow foreheads and both smiled with precisely the same expression. The Stanburys had set their hopes on a possible match with the more prosperous and powerful Bowdens. Bartholomew, indeed, held that his daughter's happiness must be assured if she could win such a husband as David.

"Call your mother, Bart," said Mr. Stanbury, "and we'll have tea. Haven't seen 'e this longful time, David, but I hope all's well to home and the rabbits running heavy."

"Never better," answered young Bowden.

"As for us, can't say it's been all to the good," declared the farmer. "Never knowed a fairer or hotter summer, but in August the maggots got in the sheep's backs something cruel. Bart here was out after 'em all his time—wasn't you, Bart?"

Bart had a habit of patting his chin and nodding when he spoke. He did so now.

"Yes, I was," said Bart. "A terrible brave show of maggots, sure enough."

Mrs. Stanbury appeared, and it might be seen that while her son resembled his father, it was from the mother that Margaret took her dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes and wistful cast of countenance. She was a neat, small woman, and to-day, clad in her plum-coloured Sunday gown with a silver watch-chain and a touch of colour in her black cap, had no little air of distinction about her. Her face was long and rather sad, but it had been beautiful before the mouth fell in somewhat. Constance Stanbury was eight years older than her husband and of a credulous nature, at once vaguely poetical and definitely pessimistic. She depreciated everything that belonged to herself; even when her children were praised to her face, she would deprecate enthusiasm with silence or a shrug. She believed in mysteries, in voices that called by night, in dreams, in premonitions, in the evil omen and the evil eye. Her brother had destroyed himself, and she was not the first of her race who had suffered from a congenital melancholia.

"I hope your scalded hand be doing nicely, ma'am," said David, with the politeness of a lover to the mother of his lass.

"Yes, thank you. 'Twas my own silly fault, trying to do two things at once. 'Tis of no consequence."

"I'll pour out the tea," said Margaret. "Then you needn't take your hand out of the sling, mother."

Mrs. Stanbury's profound and pathetic distrust and doubt that she could possess or achieve any good thing, extended from the greatest to the least interest in life. Now they ate and drank, and David ventured to praise a fine cake of which he asked for a second slice.

"Glad you like it, I'm sure," she said, "but 'tisn't much of a cake. Too stoggy and I forgot the lemon."

"Never want to taste a better," declared David, stoutly. "Our cakes to Ditsworthy ban't a patch on it."

Mrs. Stanbury smiled faintly.

"Did your mother catch any good from the organy tea?" she asked.

"Yes," answered David. "A power of good it did her, and I was specially to say she was greatly obliged for it; and if by lucky chance you'd saved up a few bunches more organies, she'd like 'em."

"Certainly, an' t'other herb to go along with it. I dried good store at the season of the year. Some people say the moon don't count in the matter; but there's a right and wrong in such things, and the moon did ought to be at the full without a doubt. Who be we to say that the wit of our grandfathers was of no account?"

The herb " organies," or wild marjoram, was still drunk as tea in Mrs. Stanbury's days, and decoctions of it were widely used after local recipes for local ills.

" This here Chinese tea be a lot nicer to my taste, all the same," said Bart. " We have it Sundays, and I wouldn't miss it for money."

" We drink it every day," said David.

" Ah ! you rich folk can run to it, no doubt."

" But we don't brew so strong as what you do," added young Bowden.

" This is far too strong," declared Mrs. Stanbury, instantly. " It have stood over long, and the bitter be drawed out."

" That's my fault for being late," answered Margaret. " No fault of yours, mother."

" I like the bitter," said Bart. " 'Tis pretty drinking and proper to work on. Cider isn't in it with cold tea."

Dusk gathered, and the firelight flickered in the little whitewashed kitchen. Then David mentioned a project near his hopes.

" You thought you'd found a fox's earth 'pon Coombeshead Tor," he said to Madge.

" I do think so ; and if you've made an end of eating, us'll go an' see afore 'tis dark."

" I've finished, and very much obliged, I'm sure."

David rose, picked up his felt hat and bade the parent Stanburys " good evening." Then he and Margaret went out together. Bart prepared to accompany them, when suddenly, as if shot, he sank down into his chair again beside his father and put his hand to his chin.

" Why for did 'e kick me, faither ? " he asked when the lovers had disappeared.

" You silly zany ! They don't want you ! "

Bart grinned.

" He be after Madge—eh ? "

" Wait till you'm daft for something in a petticoat yourself then you'll understand—eh, mother ? "

" I suppose so, master. We shall lose 'em both, without a doubt ; 'tis Nature," she said.

Meantime Margaret and David climbed into the gloaming on Coombeshead Tor, and she talked to him, and for the first time let him know how much the wonderful granite masses of this hill meant to her.

" I was born in the farm, you know, and this place was my playground ever since I could run alone. A very lonely little girl, because Bart was six year older than me, and mother never had none but us. I never had no toys

or nothing of that sort; but these gert stones was my dollies, and I used to give 'em names, an' play along with 'em, an' sleep among 'em when I was tired. That fond of chattering I was, that I must be talking if 'twas only to the stones! Never was a cheel cut out for minding babies like me; and yet I've not had a baby to mind in my life!"

He listened and enjoyed her voice, but felt not much emotion at what she told him.

"So these boulders were my babies; an' now this one took a cold and wanted nursing; an' now this one was tired and I had to sing it to sleep. And I'd bring 'em flowers an' teach 'em their lessons, an' put 'em to bed an' all the rest of it. They all had their names too, I warrant you!"

"'Twas a very clever game to think upon," he said.

"Thicky stone, wi' grass on his head, was called 'Pilgarlic.' His hair is green in summer and it turns yellow, like 'tis now, when winter comes. And yonder rock—its real name is the 'Cuckoo stone,' because cuckoo always sits there to cry when he comes to Dennycoombe; that flat rock was 'Lame Annie'—a poor friend of mine as couldn't walk."

David laughed.

"Fancy thinking such things all out of your own head!" he exclaimed. "Ah! here's the earth! Yes, that's a fox."

Presently he prepared to go homeward and she offered to walk a little of the way by a sheep-track under Eylesbarrow.

He agreed and thanked her; but when the turning point was reached, David declared that it was now too dark for Margaret to see her way home at all. And so it became necessary for him to turn again and walk beside her until Coombeshead windows blinked through the night.

Then he left her, and ventured to squeeze her hand rather tightly as he did so. He went home somewhat slowly and suffered as many sensations of affection, admiration and uneasiness as his nature would admit. He was deep in love and felt that possession of Margaret Stanbury represented the highest good his life could offer.

CHAPTER V

THE VIRGIN AND THE DOGS

RHODA BOWDEN loved the dogs and her part in the little commonwealth of Ditsworthy lay with them. Ten were kept, and money was made from Elias Bowden's famous breed of spaniels. To see Rhoda, solemn and stately, with puppies squealing and tumbling before her, or hanging on to her skirts, was a familiar sight at the warren.

"It takes all sorts to make a world," said Mrs. Bowden, "and I must allow my Rhoda never neighboured kindly with the babbies—worse than useless with 'em; but let it be a litter, and she's all alive and clever as need be."

Indeed, the girl had extraordinary skill in canine affairs. She loved and understood the dogs; and they loved her. By a sort of instinct she learned their needs and aversions, and the brutes paid her with a blind worship that woke as soon as their eyes opened on the world. Yelping and screaming, the puppies paddled about after her; the old dogs walked by her side or galloped before. Sometimes she went to the warren with them and watched them working. After David they were nearer to her heart than most of her own species. She seemed to fathom their particular natures and read their individual characters with a closeness more intense and a judgment more accurate than she possessed for mankind.

Perhaps not only dogs woke this singular understanding in her. As a child she had chosen to be much alone, and in silent reveries, before the ceaseless puzzles of Ditsworthy, she had sat sequestered amid natural things and watched the humble-bees in the thyme, the field-mice, the wheatears, and the hawks and lizards. She had regarded all these lives as running parallel with her own. They were fellow mortals and no doubt possessed their own interests, homes, anxieties and affairs. She had felt very friendly to them all and had liked to suppose that they were happy and prosperous. That they lived on each other did not puzzle her or pain her. It was so. She herself—and David—lived by the rabbits. Many thousands of the busy brown people passed away through the winter to make the prosperity of Ditsworthy. That was a part of the order of things, and she accepted in with indifference. Death, indeed, she mourned instinctively, but she did not hate it.

She loved the night and often, from childhood, crept forth alone into darkness or moonlight.

There was no humour in Rhoda. She smiled if David laughed, but even his weak sense of the laughter in life exceeded hers by much, and she often failed after serious search to see reason for his amusement. Such laughter-lovers as Bartley Crocker frankly puzzled her. Indeed, she felt a contempt for them.

Life had its own pet problems, and most of these she shared with David; but of late every enigma had sunk before a new and gigantic one. David was in love with a girl and certainly hoped to marry her. Until now the great and favourite mystery in Rhoda's life was the meaning of the old sundial at Sheepstor church. Above the porch may still be seen a venerable stone cut to represent a human skull from whose eye-sockets and bony jaws there spring fresh ears of wheat. Cross-bones support the head of Death, and beneath them stands a winged hour-glass with the words "Mors Janua Vitae."

This fragment had since her childhood been a fearful joy to Rhoda. It was still an object of attraction; but now she had ceased to want an explanation and would have refused to hear one: the mystery sufficed her. David, too, had shared her emotions in the relic and had often advanced theories to explain the eternal wonder of the wheat springing from human bones.

And now all lesser things were fading before the great pending change, and Rhoda went uneasy and not wholly happy, like an animal that feels the approach of storm. Margaret Stanbury interested her profoundly and there lurked no suspicion of jealousy in Rhoda's attitude; but critical she was, and terribly jealous for David. Young Bowden's mother had been much easier to satisfy than his sister. With careful and not unsympathetic mind Rhoda summed up Madge; and the estimate, as was inevitable, found David's sweetheart wanting.

The irony of chance had cast Madge into a house childless save for her elder brother; and her instincts had driven her to pet and nurse the boulders on Coombeshead; while for Rhoda were babies and to spare provided, but she ever evaded that uncongenial employment and preferred a puppy to a child.

Rhoda held her own opinions concerning the opposite sex, and they were contradictory. A vague ideal of man haunted her mind, but it was faint and indefinite. She required some measure of special consideration for women from men; but personally she could not be said to offer

any charm of womanhood in exchange. She expected attention of a sort, but she never acknowledged it in a way to gladden a masculine heart. And yet her loveliness and her presence made men forget these facts. They began by being enthusiastic and only cooled off after a nearer approach had taught them her limitations. In the general opinion Rhoda "wanted something" to complete her; but here and there were those who did not mark this shadowy deficiency. Mr. Simon Snell regarded her as the most complete and admirable woman he had ever seen; and David also knew of no disability in his sister. It is true that she differed radically from Margaret; but that was not a fault in his estimation. He hoped that these two women would soon share his home; he believed that each must win from the other much worth the winning; and he held each quite admirable, though with a different sort of perfection.

On a day at edge of winter, the mistress of the dogs sat on a rock and watched her brothers Napoleon and Wellington, and her sister, Dorcas, engaged with a ferret. The long, pink-eyed, lemon-coloured brute had a string tied round its neck and was then sent into the burrows. Anon the boys dug down where the string indicated, and often found two or three palpitating rabbits cornered at the end of a tunnel. Then they dragged them out and broke their necks. At Rhoda's feet four spaniel puppies fought with a rabbit-skin, while she and their mother watched them admiringly.

Towards this busy scene there came a woman, and Rhoda, recognizing Mrs. Stanbury, walked to meet her.

"Be your mother at home, my dear?" asked the elder. "'Twas ordained us should have a bit of a tell about one or two things, and I said a while ago, when us met Sunday week, that I'd pick a dry day and come across."

"She's at home, and faither too. We're making up a big order for Birmingham and everybody's to work."

"Such a hive as you be here. Bless them two boys, how they do grow, to be sure!"

She pointed to the twins, Samson and Richard, who had just joined their elder brothers.

Rhoda led the way and they approached the house. White pigeons and blue circled round about the eaves, and sweet peat smoke drifted from the chimney. A scrap of vegetable garden protected from the east by a high wall, lay beside the dwelling, and even unexpected flowers—gifts from the valleys—made shift to live and blossom here. Aubretias struggled in the stones by the garden path, and

a few Michaelmas daisies, now in the sere, also prospered there. Sarah Bowden herself, and only she, looked after the flowers. They were a sort of pleasure to her—especially the daffodils that speared through the black earth and hung out their orange and lemon and silver in spring. Walls of piled peat and stone surrounded the garden, and the grey face of the Warren House opened upon it. At present the garden and porch were full of rabbit baskets packed for market. One could only see rows and rows of little hind pads stained brown by the peat.

Mr. Bowden was doing figures at a high desk in the corner of the kitchen, and his wife sat by the fire mending clothes. Rhoda left Mrs. Stanbury with them and went out again to the boys.

Sarah Bowden had grown round-backed with crouching over many babies. She loved them and everything to do with them. Had Nature permitted it, she would gladly have begun to bear another family. Now she picked up her skirt and dusted a chair.

"Don't, please, demean yourself on my account," said Constance Stanbury. "I've come from master. As you know, my dear, there's something in the wind, and Bartholomew thought that perhaps you'd be so kind as to spare the time and tell me a little how it strikes you and what you feel about it."

"Fetch out elderberry wine and seedy cake," said Elias. "Mrs. Stanbury must have bit and sup. She've come a rough road."

"No, no. No occasion, I'm sure. Don't let me put you to no trouble, Sarah."

"Very pleased," said Mrs. Bowden. "'Tis about David and your maiden you be here, of course?"

"So it is then. My children ain't nothing out of the common, you must know—haven't got more sense than, please God, they should have. But all the same Margaret's a very good, fearless girl, and kind-hearted you might say even."

"Kind-hearted! Why, her name's knowed all up the countryside for kindness," said Mrs. Bowden. "She's a proper fairy, and we be very fond of her, ban't we, Elias?"

"Yes," said Mr. Bowden. "She's got every vartue but cash."

"She'm to have twenty-five pounds on her wedding-day, however. Of course to people like you, with large ideas about money, such a figure be very small; but her father's put it by for her year after year, and she'll have it."

"Well done, Stanbury!" said Mr. Bowden.

"They ban't tokened yet, and you might think us a thought too pushing, which God forbid, I'm sure," said Mrs. Stanbury, crumbling her cake and not eating it. "But it's going to be. I know the signs. Your David's set on her, and he's the sort who have their way. That man's face wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, if I may say so. Not that he'll get 'no' for an answer. There's that in my daughter's eyes when his name is named.—So 'tis just so good as done so far as they're concerned."

Mr. Bowden left his desk and came to the table. He poured out a glass of elderberry wine for himself and drank it.

"Listen to me," he said. "Wool is worth one shilling and sevenpence a pound, and David be going to buy fifty sheep. You might ax how? Well, his Uncle Partridge—Sarah's late brother—left him five hundred pound under his will; and when he marries and leaves here, he'll spend a bit of that on sheep—old Dartmoor crossed with Devon Long Wool. 'Tis a brave breed and the wonderfulest wool as you'll handle in England. The only care is not to breed out the Dartmoor constitution. I may tell you an average coat is twelve pounds of wool. So there you are."

Mr. Bowden instantly returned to his stool and his ledger. He appeared to regard his statement as strictly relative, and, indeed, Mrs. Stanbury so understood it. In their speech, as in their written communications, the folk shear off every redundancy of expression until only the bare bones of ideas remain—sometimes without even necessary connecting links.

"We never doubted that he was snug. But where be he going, if I might ask?" said Mrs. Stanbury.

"Wait," answered Elias, twisting round but not dismounting. "We haven't come to that. I should mention ponies also. There'll be ponies so well as sheep, and in God's good time, when old Jonathan Dawe's carried to the yard, David may become Moorman of the quarter. Nobody's better suited to the work. Well—ponies.—With ponies what live be all profit, and what die be no loss. In fact, if you find the carpses soon enough, they be a gain too, for the dogs eat 'em. The chap as was up here afore me twenty-five year ago, was a crooked rogue, and many a pony did he shoot when they comed squealing to the doors in snowy weather—for his dogs."

"David be going to build a house," said Mrs. Bowden. "He couldn't abide living in no stuffy village after the warren, so he's going to find a place—he've got his eye on it a'ready, for that matter."

"Not too far away, I hope—if I may venture to say so."

"Not at all far, and closer to you than us. He was full of a place under Black Tor as he'd found by the river. There's a ruin of the 'old men' there, as only wants building up to make a very vitty cottage."

"And you see no objection and think 'tis a good enough match for your boy?"

"Just so," said Elias.

"Then I won't take up no more of your time, for I mark 'tis a rabbit day with you."

"There's a thought comes over me, however," said Sarah, "and 'tis about the young youth, Bartley Crocker. Mind, Constance, I'm not saying anything against him. But David's had the man on his mind a bit of late, and perhaps you know why."

"No doubt I do," said Mrs. Stanbury. "You see, Nanny Crocker have took up with Madge lately, and I believe she actually thinks as my girl be almost good enough for her boy. 'Tis a great compliment, but she've begun at the wrong end—curious such a clever woman as her. Margaret likes Bartley Crocker very well, as all the maidens do for that matter. A very merry chap, but terrible lazy and terrible light-minded."

"You'll not often find a young man so solid and steady as our David."

"Never seed the like, Sarah. An old head on young shoulders."

"I've said of him before, and I'll say of him again, that nought could blow David off his own bottom," declared Elias. "As to t'other chap, he may have a witty mother, but bottom—none; ballast—not a grain. A very frothy, fair-weather fellow."

"What I say is, with so much open laughter there must be hidden tears. Nobody can always be in such a good temper—like a schoolboy just runned out of school," said Mrs. Stanbury.

"Why 'tis so—ever grinning and gallivanting, that chap," answered the man. "David's built of different clay, and though your daughter may not have much to laugh at, for I'll grant he's a bit solemn, yet she'll have nought to cry at; and that's a lot more to the point."

"Her nature do tend to laughter, however; I won't hide that from you. Madge will get a bit of fun out of married life. Her very love for David will make her bright and merry as a dancing star."

"Why not? Why not?" asked Mrs. Bowden.

"No reason," summed up the warrener. "She'll

bring the flummery and David will bring the pudding. Leave it so. They must do the rest. And as for laughter, why, I can laugh in the right place myself, as well as any man."

Mrs. Stanbury rose.

"I may tell master, then, that you'm both willing and agreeable ?"

"Certainly you may; and when things is forwarder, David will put his prospects afore Bartholomew Stanbury all straight and clear."

"'Tis a very great match for any daughter of mine, and I hope she'll rise worthy of it."

"Don't be downcast, my dear," said Sarah. "Margaret's as good as gold, and lucky the man that gets her, though my own son."

"You speak too kind, I'm sure—both of 'e," declared Mrs. Stanbury; then she departed and her neighbours discussed her.

"Never seed the like of that woman for crying 'stinking fish,'" said Mr. Bowden; and his wife admitted it.

"She do make the worst of herself and her belongings without a doubt; but a good sort and better far than the puffed-up people."

"Seems to go in fear whether she ought to be alive—eh ?"

"Yes, you might say so."

Elias uttered one of his sudden chuckles.

"What be laughing at ?" asked his wife.

"Why, I was thinking when that humble-minded creature comes to die, she'll tell the angels when they come to fetch her, that she really ban't anything like good enough for the Upper Place !"

CHAPTER VI

THE HOST OF "THE CORNER HOUSE"

"THE Corner House" stood just outside Sheepstor village, and Mr. Reuben Shillabeer—a childless widower—was host of it. His wife had been dead ten years, but he kept her memory green, and so much that happened in the world appeared to remind him sorrowfully of her, that the folk found him depressing. Some air of romance from the past hung about Mr. Shillabeer: he had moved in sporting circles and been a prize-fighter. Though his own record in the ring was not glorious and consisted of five battles and one victory, yet Mr. Shillabeer had known as a friend and equal the giants of the past. In rare moments of cheerfulness he would open his huge palm before the spectator and explain how that hand had shaken the unconquerable and terrible "rights" of the three immortal "Toms."

"I've knowed all three—Tom Cribb, Tom Spring and that wonder of the world, Tom Sayers," Mr. Shillabeer would say; "all Champions of England and all very friendly to me. And Mr. Spring would have been my second in my affair with Andy Davison, 'the Rooster,' but he had other business on hand. And now," Mr. Shillabeer would sum up mournfully, "now Cribb be in his grave and Spring in his, and Sayers will fight no more, though still the glory of the nation. But they always called me the 'Devonshire Dumpling'; and when I had my one and only benefit in the Fives Court, Mr. Spring showed, God bless him for it, though only a fortnight after his first mill with Jack Langan."

In person the "Devonshire Dumpling," now a man of sixty, was built on massive lines. He stood six feet two inches, and weighed sixteen stone. His large, heavy-jowled face was mild and melancholy; his eyes were brown and calf-like. One nostril had been split and flattened in battle, and the symmetry of his countenance was thereby spoiled. He shaved clean, but under his double chin there sprouted and spread a thick fringe or mat of hair—foxy-grey and red mingled. Tremendous shoulders and arms belonged to Mr. Shillabeer. Sometimes he would perform feats of strength for the pleasure of the bar,

and he could always be prevailed upon to discuss two subjects, now both defunct: the prize-ring, and his wife.

Tom Sayers had recently fought John Heenan, and the great records of the Ring were closed. Jem Mace was now champion, and his prowess perhaps revived the moribund sport for a few years; but prize-fighting had passed into the control of dishonest rascals and the fighters were merely exploited by the lowest and most ruffianly types of sporting men. The Ring had perished, and many a straight, simple-hearted spirit of the old school regretted the fact, even as Shillabeer did. He was not vain and never hesitated to give the true reasons for his own undistinguished career.

There fell an evening in the bar of "The Corner House" when Mr. Shillabeer appeared in a temper unusually brisk and genial. He even cracked a massive joke with Charles Moses, the shoemaker and vicar's warden. There were present also Simon Snell, David Bowden from Ditsworthy, Ernest Maunder, the village constable, and other persons.

Mr. Moses reproved a certain levity in the leviathan host.

"What's come to you, 'Dumpling'? A regular three-year-old this evening. But you'm not built for it, my dear. 'Tis like an elephant from a doomshow trying to play the monkey's tricks."

At this criticism Reuben Shillabeer instantly subsided. He drew beer for Bowden, cast David's three halfpence into the till and turned to Mr. Moses.

"You're right. 'Tis for dapper, bird-like men—same as you—to be light and pranksome. I've marked that you shoemakers do always take a hopeful view of life. Working in leather dries up the humours of the body and makes all the organs brisk and quick about their business, I believe. Then, as vicar's warden, you get religion in a way that's denied to us common men. You're in that close touch with parson that good must come of it."

"It does," admitted Mr. Moses. "It surely does."

"You can see it in your face, Charles," asserted Mr. Maunder. "Some people might say you had a more religious face than parson's self—his being so many shades nearer plum-red."

"But it's not a fault in the man," argued Mr. Shillabeer. "There's no John Barleycorn in the colour, only nature in him. Yet an unfortunate thing, and certainly lessens his weight in the pulpit with strangers."

"I'm glad that you feel my face to be a good face, Ernest Maunder," replied Mr. Moses. "Only once have I ever

had my face thrown in my face, so to speak; and that was by a holy man of all men. In charity, I've always supposed him short-sighted. 'Twas the 'revival' gentleman that put up with you, Shillabeer, a few years agone, and preached in the open air, and drawed a good few to hear him."

"A Wesleyan and a burning light, and proud it made me having him here," said the innkeeper. "A saintly soul the man had."

"Well, he met me as he was going to his pitch one Sunday morning—me in black, of course, and off to church. 'Friend,' he said, 'be honest with yourself and with me. Are you saved?' You could have knocked me down with a feather, folks. 'Saved,' I said, 'saved! *Me!* Good God A'mighty, man,' I said, 'you'm talking to the vicar's warden!' No doubt he was shocked to think of what he had done; but he didn't show it. He went his way with never a word of apology neither. But a righteous creature."

"I quite agree. I listened to him," said Mr. Snell. "I wasn't saved afore; but I have been ever since."

A labourer laughed.

"You're safe enough, Simon. It ban't in you to do nothing wrong."

"I hope not, Timothy Mattacott, but I have my evil thoughts with the worst among you," answered Snell. "I often wish I had more money—and yet a well paid man."

"You leat chaps all get more than you're worth," said Bowden. "Why, 'tis only when the snow-banks choke the water that you have anything to do, save walk about with your hands in your pockets and your pipes in your teeth."

Mr. Snell had certain miles of Drake's historic waterway under his control. This aqueduct leads from the upper channels of West Dart and winds onward and downward to Plymouth. Behind Lowery, Simon's home, it passed, and for a space of two miles was in his care. They argued now upon the extent and gravity of Snell's task, and all agreed that he was fortunate. Then Mr. Maunder, returning to the point from which conversation had started, bade Reuben explain his unusual hilarity.

"Without a doubt you was above your nature when us first came in, 'Dumpling'—as Moses here pointed out. And if any good fortune have fallen to you, I beg you'll name it, for there's not a man in this bar but will be glad to hear about it," declared the policeman.

"Hear, hear, Maunder!" said Mr. Moses; "your good be our good, neighbour."

"Thank you kindly, souls. 'Twas naught, and yet I won't say that. A letter, in fact, from an old London friend of mine. A very onusual sort of man by the name of Fogo. I may have mentioned him when telling about the old fights."

"Be it the gentleman you call 'Frosty-faced Fogo'?" inquired Mattacott.

"The same," answered Reuben. "'Frosty-faced Fogo' is in Devonsheer—at Plymouth, if you'll believe it. There's a twenty-round spar between two boys there, and Fogo, at the wish of a sporting blade in London, who's backing one of 'em, be down to see the lad through. And what's made me so cheerful is just this: that, for the sake of old times, 'Frosty-face' is coming on here to put up with me for a week, or maybe more. You'll hear some wonders, I warn 'e. That man's knowed the cream of the P.R. and pitched more Rings, along with old Tom Oliver, the Commissary-General, than any other living creature."

"My father must come down for to see him," said David. "There's naught rejoices him like valour, and he wouldn't miss the sight of such a character for money."

"All are welcome," declared Shillabeer with restrained enthusiasm. "I shall hope to have a sing-song for Mr. Fogo one night. And he'll tell you about Bendigo, and Ben Caunt, and Burke, 'the Deaf 'Un,' and many of the great mills in the forties. I was the very daps of Ben Caunt myself—though he stood half an inch higher. We was neither of us in the first rank for science, but terrible strong and gluttons for punishment. Caunt was Champion in his day, but never to be named alongside Cribb or Dutch Sam or Crawley or Jem Belcher."

"When's he to be here?" asked Mr. Maunder. "I feel almost as if such a man of war threatens to break the peace by coming amongst us."

"You're a fool," answered David, bluntly. "A man like you, instead of being in such a mortal dread of peace-breaking, ought to welcome the chance of it now and again. If I was a policeman, I should soon get tired of just paddling up and down through Sheep's Tor mud, week in, week out, and never have naught to do but help a lame dog over a stile or tell some traveller the way. 'Tis a tame and spiritless life."

"The tamer the better," declared Ernest Maunder, frankly. "I like it tame. 'Tis my business to maintain law and order, and that I will do, Bowden. And to tell

me I'm a fool is very disorderly in you, as well you know. I may have my faults, but a fool I'm not, as this bar will bear me out."

"I merely say," returned David, "that if I was a peeler, I should want to earn my money, and have a dash at life, and make a stir, if 'twas only against poachers here and there."

"Shows how little you know about it," answered Maunder. He was a placid, straw-coloured man, with an official mind. "You say 'poachers.' Well, poachers ban't my business. Poachers come under a different law, and unless I have the office from headquarters to set out against 'em to the neglect of my beat, I can't do it. I'm part of a machine, and if I got running about as you say, I should throw the machine out of order."

"What for do you want to speak to the man like that?" asked Mattacott, who was the policeman's friend. "You Bowdens all think yourselves so much above the common people—God knows why for. One would guess you was spoiling for a fight yourself. Well, I dare say, the 'Dumpling' here could find somebody at your own weight as wouldn't fear a set-to with you."

"Why not you?" said Bowden. "When you like, Mattacott."

"What a fiery twoad 'tis! Why, you'm a stone heavier than me, and years younger."

Mr. Shillabeer regarded David with some professional interest.

"You'm a nice built chap, but just of that awkward weight 'twixt light and middle. In the old days I knowed some of the best bruisers you could wish to see were the same; but 'twas always terrible difficult to get 'em a job, because they was thought too light for the heavies and too heavy for the lights. But Dutch Sam in his day, and Tom Sayers in his, showed how eleven-stone men, and even ten-stone men, can hit as hard as anything with a fist. As for you, Bowden, you've a bit of the fighting cut—inclined to be snake-headed, though your forehead don't slope enough. But you're a thought old now."

"Not that I want to fight any man without a cause," said David. "If there's a reason, I'd fight anything on two legs—light or heavy—but not for fun. And I hope you men—Mattacott and Ernest Maunder—haven't took offence where none was meant."

"Certainly not," declared Mr. Maunder. "I'll take anything afore I take offence. 'Tis my place to keep the peace, and if I don't set an example of it, who should?

Twice only in my life have I drawed my truncheon in the name of the Queen, and I hope I'll never have no call to do it thrice. Have a drink, David ; then I must be going."

But Bowden declined with thanks, and the company soon separated.

When he was alone, fired by the prospect of seeing his old friend once more, Reuben Shillabeer took a damp towel and, visiting each in turn, polished up the portraits of a dozen famous pugilists which hung round the walls of his bar. Where sporting prints of race-horses and fox-hunting are generally to be met with, Mr. Shillabeer had a circle of prize-fighters ; and now he rubbed the yellow stains of smoke off the glasses that covered them, so that the stern, but generally open and often handsome countenances of the fighting giants looked forth from their grimy frames. Before a print of the famous "Tipton Slasher" Mr. Shillabeer paused, and thoughtfully stroked his battered nose.

"Ah, Bill Perry," he said, "if I'd been ten year younger——"

Then having extinguished two oil lamps, the old man retired and left his gallery of the great in darkness.

CHAPTER VII

DENNYCOOMBE WOOD

OF dingles under Dartmoor there is none so fair as Dennycoombe. Here wood and water, rock and heath, wide spaces and sweet glens mingle together, and make a theatre large enough for the pageant of the seasons, a haunt small enough to be loved as a personal possession and abiding treasure. Dennycoombe tends upwards to Coombeshead, and the little grey farmhouse of Bartholomew Stanbury dominates the scene, and stands near the apex of the valley. At this hour, after noon in early December, a croft or two made light on the hill, where green of turnips and glaucous green of swedes ran parallel, and black tilled earth also broke the medley of the waste. Then winked out the farm from twin dormer windows—a thing of moorstone colour, yet splashed as to the lintel-post with raw whitewash, so that it should be seen in the darkness of moonless nights. Beneath, through a bottom of willow scrub, furze and stunted oak, the Dennycoombe stream tumbled and rattled to join Meavy far below. A single "clapper" of granite spanned this brook for foot-passengers; while above it, under heathery banks, the rivulet crossed a cart-track at right angles, and widened there to make a ford.

Over these small waters at this hour came Margaret from her home; and though the day lacked for sunshine, her heart was full of it, because now she went to meet the man she loved best on earth, at a place she loved best of earth.

There are words that light a lamp in the heart and wake in the mind images of good things, with all the colour and life, the loveliness and harmony proper to them. There are syllables whose chance utterance unlocks all the gates of the mind; floods the spirit with radiance; lifts to delight, if the fair thought belongs as much to the future as the past; but throbs chastened through the soul if the fragrant memory is appropriated by the past alone.

Dennycoombe Wood meant much to this woman. In spring and summer, in autumn and winter, she knew it and cherished it always. And now she saw it with the larches

feathering to a still grey sky, their crests of pale amber spread transparently upon the darker heart of the underwood beneath them. Grey through the last of the foliage thrust up a network of bough and branch; here a cluster of blue-green firs melted together and massed upon the forest; here dark green pines, straight-limbed, lifted their pinnacles all fringed with russet cones. A haze of the larch needles still aloft washed the whole wood delicately and shone against the inner gloom of it. Round the spinney edge stood beeches with boles of mottled silver, and their remaining foliage set the faint gold of the forest in a frame of copper. Lower still, under broken banks, lay the auburn brake; and great stones, in the glory of their mosses, glimmered like giant emeralds out of the red water-logged tangle of the fern. The hill fell steeply beneath Dennycoombe Wood, and there were spaces of grass and many little blunt whitethorns, now naked, that spattered the slope with patches of cobweb grey.

All was cast together in the grand manner of a forest edge; and all was kneaded through by the still, gentle light of a sunless and windless December hour before dusk. The place of the sun, indeed, appeared behind a shield of pearl that floated westerly and sank upon the sky; but light remained clear and colourless; tender, translucent grey swept the firmament, and scarcely a darker detail of cloud floated upon it. The day was a tranquillity between two storms, of which one had died at dawn and the other was to waken after midnight.

Nothing had influenced Margaret towards Elias Bowden's eldest son but her own heart. She had known now for some time that two men loved her, and she felt a certain affection for both; but the regard for Bartley was built on their likeness in temper; the love for David arose out of their differences. Bartley's weakness, which in some measure was her own, attracted Madge towards him; but David's strength—a quality quite different from any that she possessed—drew her forcibly into his arms. When she found that he loved her, the other man suffered a change and receded into a region somewhat vague and shadowy. Friendly she felt to Bartley Crocker and eager to serve him and advance his welfare, but the old dreams were dead. She had thought of him as a husband, in the secret places of her heart, long before he thought of her—or of anybody—as a wife; but now that his mind was seriously turned in her direction and he began to long for her, the time was past and his sun had set upon a twilight of steadfast friendship that could never waken again into any warmer

emotion. Madge liked him, and the years to come showed how much ; but she never loved him.

The tryst was a great stone under a holly tree, and through the stillness, over a sodden mat of fallen leaves, she came and found David waiting. He had not heard her, and he did not see her, for his back was turned and he sat on the stone, his chin in his hands, very deep in thought. His hat was off, and his hair was brushed up on end. He wore velveteens and gaiters, and had made some additions to his usual week-day toilet in the shape of a collar, a tie, and a white linen shirt. The collar appeared too tight and once he tugged at it and strained his neck. For a little while Margaret watched him, then she came forward and stood by him and put out her hand. He jumped up, hot and red ; then, for a long time, he shook the small hand extended to him. As he did so, she blushed and felt an inclination to weep.

His slow voice steadied her emotion and calmed them both.

"Sit here, if not too hard for 'e. 'Tis dry fern. I found it a bit ago."

She mounted the stone with help from his arm. Then he sat beside her.

"I think it terrible kind of you to be here," he said. "To come here for to listen to a great gawkim like me."

"You're not a gawkim. You're the wittiest chap this side of the Moor. Leastways my father always says so."

"Very kind of him. There's no man I'd sooner please. Well—well—'tis a thing easily said and yet—— However, all the same, I wouldn't say it to-day if I hadn't axed you to come here, for I had a fore-token against it yesterday."

"Whatever do you mean ?"

"A white rabbit. You'll laugh, but your mother wouldn't. And my father have a great feeling against 'em, though he can't explain it, and grows vexed if anybody says anything. Not on the warren ; but over on the errish* down to Yellowmead I seed it."

"I care nothing for that—at least——" She stopped doubtfully.

"If you don't care, more won't I. Then here goes. Can you hear it ? Can a rare maiden like you let a rough chap like me offer to marry her ? For that's what I've axed you to come here about."

She was silent and he spoke again.

"Could you ? There's things in my favour as well as things against me."

* *Errish* = Stubble.

"There's nothing, nothing against you, David."

"Then you'll take me!"

"And proud and happy to."

"Lord! How easy after all," he said—more to himself than to her. "And here I've been stewing over this job for two months, and sleeping ill of nights, and fretting. Yet, you see, 'twas the work of a moment. Thank you, thank you very much indeed for marrying me, Madge. I'll make you the best husband I know how. I must tell you all about the plans I've built up in hope you would say 'yes'—hundreds of 'em. And you'll have to help now."

He was amazingly collected and calm. He told her how he proposed a house for them far from other dwellings, where they would have peace from the people and privacy and silence. He had found such a place on the upper waters of Meavy, where stood a ruin that might easily be restored and made a snug and comfortable home. He meant to breed ponies and sheep. The suggestion was that Rhoda joined them and looked after the dogs. He could hardly get on without her, and she would certainly be very miserable away from him.

"She reckons that no woman living be good enough for you," said Margaret, faintly. Her voice showed her heart was hungry, empty. She had expected a meal and it was withheld.

David laughed.

"To be frank, she do."

"And no man living good enough for herself."

"As to that, the right one will come along in time. She shan't marry none but the best. She likes you well, Madge, as well she may; but she hasn't got hold of the idea of me married yet. Now she'll jolly soon have to do it. There's five hundred pound has come to me, you must know, under the will of my mother's brother who died back-along. It's goodied a bit since, and us'll have some sheep and you'll have a nice little lot of poultry. And Sir Guy will rebuild the ruin. It is all his ground. And now you've said 'yes,' I shall ask 'em to begin. When can you come to see the place?"

"So soon as ever you like," she said. "I hope 'tisn't too far away from everybody."

"Not so far as I could wish; but far enough. The ruins be old miners' works; and we'll have a shippen and a dog-kennel and all complete, I promise you."

For a long time he talked of his hopes and plans, but she came not directly into them. It seemed that her help was

hardly vital to the enterprise. At last she brought the matter back to the present; and she spoke in tones that might have touched the stone she sat on.

"I'll try so hard to make you a good wife, David."

He started and became dimly conscious of the moment and the mighty thing that had happened to him in it.

"I know that right well. Too good for me every way. Too gentle and soft and beautiful. I'll be tremendous proud of you, Madge. And I'll do my share, and work early and late for you, and lay by for you, and lift you up, perhaps, in ten years or so to have a servant of your own, and a horse and trap of your own, and everything you can wish."

"I wish for you to love me always, always, always—nothing but that."

"And so I shall, and the best love be what swells the balance at the bank quickest. Now I know you can take me, I feel as if I should like to get up off this rock this instant moment and go away and begin working like a team of horses for 'e."

"Don't go away yet. Think what this is to me—so much, much more than it can be to you."

"'Tis everything in the world to me," he said solemnly. "You little know how you've been on my mind. My folk will tell you now, no doubt, how it has been with me. That glowering and glumping I've been—not a word to throw at man or woman. But they'll see a different chap to-night!"

She put out her hand timidly. Would he never touch her? Was she never to put her face against his?

Love reigned in his plans, and the little things that he had thought of surprised her; but there came no arm round her, no fierce caress, no hot storm of kisses. He talked hopefully—even joyfully, with his eyes upon her face; but there was no sex-light in their brightness; while hers were dreamy with love and dim with unshed tears.

"I must get back-along with the great news now," he said. "And it will be well if we're moving. Coarse weather's driving up again. I'll see you home first."

"You'll come in and tell mother?"

"Must I?"

"Yes," she answered. "You've got to obey me now, you dear David. I wish it."

"Then off we go."

He helped her down like a stranger and talked of crops as they returned to Coombeshead. Rhoda was better at figures than he was. He hoped that Margaret was good

at figures. She said waywardly that she was not, and he regretted it but felt sure that she would soon learn.

A rain-laden dusk descended over Eylesbarrow as they returned, and through the gloaming the white lintel and door-posts of the farm stared like an eye.

Silence fell between them and during its progress some touch of nature woke in David. After they had crossed the stream and reached a rush-clad shed where a cart stood, he spoke in a voice grown muddy and gruff.

"Come in here a minute," he said, "afore we go on, Madge. I want—I want——"

She turned and they disappeared.

"I want to kiss you," he said.

A fearful clatter ascended from long-legged fowls roosting on the cart, for their repose was roughly broken. They clucked and cried until Mrs. Stanbury, supposing a fox had descended from the hills, hastened out to frighten it away.

Then she met Margaret and David—shamefaced, joyous.

"We'm tokened, mother!" cried the man; "and please God, I'll be a dutiful second son to you."

"Thank you for that," she said. "Give you joy, I'm sure. And I'll be proud to have you for a son; and may you never repent your bargain."

She put up her face to his and kissed him; and since he still held Madge by the waist, all three were thus, for an instant, united in a triple caress.

By chance some moments of happy magic in the sky smiled upon this incident, for the grey west broke at its heart above the horizon and little orange feathers of light flashed suddenly along the upper chambers of the air. The Hesperides—daughters of sunset—danced golden-footed in the threshold of evening, and their glimmering skirts swept earth also, set radiance upon Eylesbarrow and hung like a beacon of fire against the deep storm-purple of the east. Thrice this glory waxed and waned; then all light vanished; the colour song was sung; the day died.

Not observing these gracious phenomena upon Night's fringes, the mother, the man and his maiden went in together.

CHAPTER VIII

IN PIXIES' HOUSE

VARIOUS interests are served by the great bulk of Sheep's Tor. Not only the colt and the coney prosper here and the vixen finds a place for her cubs, but man also avails himself of the hill in a manner little to be guessed. Battleships, swinging far off to adjust their compasses in Plymouth Sound, use the remote, ragged crown of the tor as a fixed point for determining the accuracy of their instruments; while once, if oral tradition may be respected, the stony bosom of the giant offered hiding in time of stress to a scion of the old Elford clan, lords of the demesne in Stuart days. This king's man, flying for his life from the soldiers of Cromwell, hid himself in a familiar nook; and we may suppose the "foreigners" tramped Sheep's Tor in vain, and perhaps stamped iron-shod over the rocks under which he lay safe hidden. To-day this cleft, called the Pixies' House, can still be entered. It is of a size sufficient to contain two adults in close juxtaposition; but an inner chamber has fallen, and certain drawings, with which it was alleged the concealed fugitive occupied his leisure, have, if ever they existed, vanished away.

In the very bosom of the great south-facing rocky slope of Sheep's Tor where the lichen-coated slabs and boulders are flung together in magnificent confusion, there may be found one narrow cleft, above which a mass of granite has been split perpendicularly. Chaos of stone spilled here lies all about, and numberless small crannies and chambers abound; but the rift alone marks any possible place of concealment for creature larger than dog or fox; and beneath it, invisible and unguessed, lies the Pixies' House, one of the local sanctities and a haunt of the little people.

Here, two days after Margaret had accepted David Bowden, Bartley Crocker was walking with a gun. His goal lay up the valley and he hoped to shoot some snipe; but circumstances quite altered his intentions.

The day was one of elemental unrest and the clouds rolled tumultuous. They unrolled great planes of shifting gloom and splendour, of accidents of vapour that concealed

and of light that illumined. But at mid-day a mighty shadow ascended against the wind and thunder rumbled along the edges of the Moor. The storm-centre spun about a mile off, then it drove in chariots of darkness over Sheep's Tor.

At this moment Bartley remembered the Pixies' House, and, hastening sure-footed over the wild concourse of stones that extended around it, he approached the crevice where it lay.

A woman suddenly caught his eye, and as the breaking storm now promised to be terrific, he called to her and, turning back, joined her.

It proved to be Rhoda Bowden on her way home, and she accepted Bartley's offer of shelter.

"Something pretty bad's coming," she said. "Be the Pixies' House large enough for the both of us? I've got a bit of news you'll be surprised to hear."

"Full large enough—quick—quick—down through there—let me have your hand."

But she accepted no help and soon crawled through the aperture into shelter. Then Bartley, taking two caps off the nipples of his gun, thrust it in after Rhoda and followed swiftly to avoid the onset of the storm.

They had acted with utmost speed and Rhoda was now aghast to find the exceeding propinquity of Mr. Crocker. He could hardly have been closer. She moved uneasily. It occurred to her that he ought to have surrendered the Pixies' House to her and himself found shelter elsewhere. The idea, however, had not struck him.

"Can't you make a little more room?" she asked, breathing rather hard.

"I wish I could, but it's impossible. I forgot you were such a jolly big girl," he answered.

She set her teeth and waited for the outer darkness to lighten. The thunder roared and exploded in a rattle overhead; they heard the hiss and hurtle of the ice and water; while at intervals the entrance of their shelter was splashed along its rough edges with glare of lightning.

"Better here than outside," said Bartley; but Rhoda began to doubt it. It seemed to her that he came nearer and nearer. At last she asked him to get out and let her pass.

"Can't stand this no more," she said, "I'm being choked. I'd sooner suffer the storm than this."

"You don't want to go out, surely!"

"Yes, I do."

The lightning showed him her face very close to his,

and he saw her round cheek, lovely ear and bright, hard eyes with a wild look in them, like something caught in a trap. The storm shouted to the hills and cried savagely against the granite precipices ; it leapt over the open heaths and roared into the coombes and valleys. The waste was all a dancing whiteness of hail, jewelled ever and anon by the lightning.

Already the heart of conflict had passed and it grew lighter to rearward.

" You must wait a bit yet. Your people would never forgive me if I let you go into this."

She pushed forward, then strained back horrified, for she had accidentally pressed his face with her cheek. But Bartley was not built to stand that soft, firm appulse of woman's flesh without immediate ignition.

" I must have one if I swing for it ! " he said. Then he put his arms round her and kissed her.

He expected an explosion and found himself not disappointed. The thunder-storm outside was mild to the woman-storm within when Crocker thrust his caress upon this girl. She started back as though he had stamped a red-hot iron upon her face.

" You loathsome, godless wretch ! " she shrieked out, and her voice broke the rocky bounds of earth and leapt into the storm. Thence frantically she followed it and trampled heavily on the amorous sportsman as she did so.

" I could tear the skin off my face ! " she cried ; and her words came deep and fierce and shuddering. " You coward ! I'd sooner be struck by the lightning than have suffered it ! "

She departed, running like a frightened child, and he crawled out after her and rubbed his bruised shins. Her nailed shoe had stamped on his hand, torn it and made it bleed ; but his wound was light to hers. He was back in the shelter presently, laughing and smoking his pipe while the weather cleared ; but she sobbed and panted homeward under the sob and pant of the storm. She felt unclean ; every instinct of her nature rebelled against this touch of male lips. She magnified the caress into a mountain of offence ; she held up her cheek that the rain which followed the hail might wash it and purge it from this man's hateful blandishment. Passion got hold of her violated soul, and she would gladly have called down fire from the cloud upon Crocker.

He, meantime, waited a while, and wondered what thing it was she had meant to tell him. As yet none at Sheepstor knew of Margaret's engagement, the great

subject in Rhoda's mind; but though he did not learn it from her, chance and his own act put the information into Bartley's hand within that hour. This reverse with David's sister altered his intentions and turned him towards another woman. He suddenly longed for a sight of Margaret, and, abandoning the thought of snipe, decided to go to Coombeshead and see her instantly. A still larger resolve lurked behind. Now bright weather-gleams of blue and silver opened their eyes to windward; the storm had gathered up its skirts of rack and flame into the central moor; a thousand gurgling rivulets leapt over the grass; the hail melted; the ponies turned head to wind again and went on grazing, while their wet sides steamed in a weak tremor of sunlight.

Bartley stepped forth, shouldered his gun and whistled to his dog, which had taken refuge near at hand and gone to sleep in a hole. Then he started over the Moor to his destination and his great deed.

Margaret was at home and came out to see him. His greeting amazed her, for it differed by much from what she expected. The girl doubted not that her friend had heard the news and had come to offer his congratulations; but he had not heard it, and he came to offer himself.

Mr. Crocker had toyed with this achievement for six weeks; and now the storm, and Rhoda, and certain uneasiness begot of Rhoda, and a general vague desire for something feminine as different as possible from Rhoda, together with other emotions and sensations too numerous to define, all affirmed his resolve.

He wasted no time, for he was full of desire for Madge and honestly believed that she cared for him. And in answer to his abrupt but impassioned plea, she assured him that she did care for him and that his welfare was no small thing to her.

"We've known each other ever since we was dinky boy and girl to infant school together; and I, with my managing ways, would oft blow your li'l nubby nose when it wanted it," she said, looking at him with shining eyes and in a mood emotional. "But with my David—yes, my David he is—well, 'twas love, dear Bartley, and we'm tokened. And I'm glad 'twas left for me to tell you, though 'tis terrible strange it should fall out at such a minute as this."

He stared and stammered and wished her joy. He was disappointed, but not by any means crushed to the earth. It only occurred to him that no other woman's lips would that day destroy the flavour of Rhoda Bowden's.

"Then what becomes of me?" he said; but not as though there were no answer to the question.

"You'll get a better far," she replied.

"But you—you to go into that silent family—all so stern and proper. Think twice afore 'tis too late, Madge."

"I love them all," she answered. "But silent they surely are. I took my dinner along with them yesterday and, if it hadn't been for Dorcas and me, they'd have gone without a word spoken from grace afore meat to thanksgiving after."

"Dorcas is cheerful enough."

"I like her—best after David," said Madge, a little nervously, as though she talked treason.

Then Mr. Crocker told of the storm and his companion in the Pixies' House.

"Like a damned fool, just because her cheek happened to touch mine, I kissed her."

"Bartley!"

"Well you may stare. Lord knows what come over me to do it; but I got hell for my fun, and so like as not your David will have a bit more to say later on. Him and Rhoda are the wide world to each other. I suppose you know that?"

Margaret's face clouded, but she was loyal.

"Rhoda's a splendid woman, Bartley."

"She is. Now that you won't take me, I believe I shall have a dash at her. But 'twill be a long year afore she forgives this day's work."

He left Margaret soon afterwards and his depression of spirit steadily gained upon him as he returned home. At "The Corner House" he stopped and drank awhile; then he got back to his mother and took a gloomy pleasure in shocking her pride with his news.

Nanny Crocker was sewing at the kitchen table when he returned, and his Aunt Susan brought a belated meal to him hot from the oven.

He looked at the food and then spoke.

"Can't eat," he said. "I've had a full meal to-day a'ready."

"Was you in the storm?" asked Susan. "In the midst of all that awful lightning, with thunder-planets falling and a noise in the elements like the trump of Doom.—If the cat haven't chatted in the pigs' house! Her always brings six, so no doubt that's the number."

"I've just come from asking Margaret Stanbury to marry me," said Bartley, showing no interest in the kittens. "That's what I meant when I said I've had a full meal."

"At last!" cried Nanny Crocker. "Well, well, well—and what a day to choose, my dear! God bless you both, I'm sure. She's a lucky girl and we must set to work now to teach her more than she's been able to learn at home. Rise up and kiss me, my son."

Bartley obeyed with a sort of sardonic smile under his skin. His mother kissed him fervently and sighed.

"You didn't ask twice, I lay," said Susan.

"No," he answered, "I didn't."

"'Tis a terrible pity her mother's such a chuckle-headed, timid creature," declared Nanny. "Not a word against her after to-day, of course. But I'm sorry she haven't got larger intellects and don't believe a little less."

"When is it to be, Bartley?" asked his aunt. "You're not the sort to wait long, I reckon."

"It isn't to be," he answered. "You two silly old souls run on so, and can't imagine any woman turning up her nose at me. But unfortunately other people haven't such a good opinion."

"Won't have you!" gasped his parent. "A Stanbury won't take a Crocker!"

"Madge Stanbury won't take this Crocker—which is all that matters."

"The chit!" said Nanny.

"The ninnyhammer!" cried Aunt Susan.

"The sensible girl," answered Bartley. "She's found somebody better—a man as stands to work and will make a finer fashion of husband than ever I should."

"How you can sit there and talk in that mean spirit passes me!" answered his mother. "Have a greater respect for yourself, and let that girl see to her dying day what a fool she's been."

"Who is it? I suppose you got that much out of her?" asked Bartley's aunt.

"It's David Bowden from Ditsworthy, and they've been tokened two days, so, you see, I was a bit behind the fair."

"Nobody would blame her for changing her mind yet—now you've offered yourself," declared Susan.

"She's no wish to change. She likes me very well as a friend—always have since she used to blow my nose for me in infant school—but she likes him a long sight better—well enough to wed."

"She'll change yet—mark me," foretold his aunt.

"My son have got his self-respect, I believe, Susan, and, change or not change, he'll never give her another chance, I should hope. 'Tis done, and to her dying day she'll rue it—as she well deserves. To put that rough rabbit-

catcher afore—however, I thank God she did—I thank God she did ; and I shall thank Him in person on my knees this night. Never, never was such an empty giglet wench heard of. A merciful escape without a doubt ; for a fool only breeds fools."

"I may be her brother-in-law if I can't be her husband," said Bartley ; and then he departed and left the indignant and wounded old women to wonder what he might mean.

CHAPTER IX

THE DOGS OF WAR

THE renowned Mr. Fogo, with the modesty of a man really great, arrived at Sheepstor in a butcher's trap from Plymouth. He brought a box of humble dimensions, studded with brass nails; while for the rest, a very large umbrella, two walking-sticks and a cape of London pattern completed his outfit.

Reuben Shillabeer walked as far as Sheepstor Bridge, and the two notable men met there and shook hands before numerous admiring spectators. Then the sporting butcher, who had driven Mr. Fogo from Plymouth, proceeded to Reuben's familiar inn, while "Frosty-face" and the "Dumpling" made triumphal entry into the village together. The contrast between them could scarcely have been more abrupt. Shillabeer ambled with immense strides and heaving shoulders, like a bear on its hind legs, and his great, gentle face, set in its tawny fringe of hair, smiled out upon the world with unusual animation as he shortened his gait, crooked his knees somewhat and gave his arm to his friend. The notable Fogo was a good foot shorter than Reuben—a thin, brisk, clean-shaved man with eyes like a hawk, under very heavy brows, now quite white. His nose was sharp and thin; his mouth, a slit; his hair was still thick and white as snow. Fogo numbered seventy years, yet bore himself as straight and brisk as a youth. He was agile, thin and wiry; but a certain asperity of countenance, which had won him his nickname in the past, was now smoothed away by the modelling of time, and Mr. Fogo's face, though keen, might be called amiable; though exceedingly wide-awake, revealed no acerbity of expression. His glance took in the situation swiftly.

"Crikey!" he said. "And you live here among all these trees and mountains and rocks! But I dare say, now, there's pretty fishing in this river."

"Trout—nought else. And 'tisn't the season for 'em. But a fisherman still, I see—eh? What a man! Not a day older, I warrant. And how did they serve you at Plymouth?"

"I've no fault to find with Plymouth," said Mr. Fogo.

"They done me a treat there, and we had a pretty sporting house and a nice set-to in the new way with the mufflers. I got my boy through, but he'd have lost if I hadn't been there. And now let me cast my eye over you, 'Dumpling.' The same man; but gone in the hams, I see. You big 'uns—'tis always that way. Your frames can't carry the load of fat. And so your lady has passed away to a better land. But that's old history."

"No, it isn't, Fogo," declared Mr. Shillabeer, his animation perishing. "'Twill never be old history so long as I bide in the vale; and I hope you'll have a good tell about her many a time afore you leave me. But not to-day. We'll talk about her in private—you and me—over a drop of something special."

"'Twas the weather killed her, I doubt," hazarded Mr. Fogo. "You couldn't expect a London woman to stand so much fresh air as you've got down here. Why—Good Lord!—you breathe naught with a smell to it from year to year! There's not a homely whiff of liquor or fried fish strikes the nose—not so much as the pleasant odour of brewing, or them smells that touch the beak Covent Garden way. Naught for miles and miles—unless it's pigs; and that I don't like, and never shall."

"Our air will make you terrible hungry, however," promised Mr. Shillabeer; "and by the same token we'd better get on our way, for there's a goose with apple sauce and some pretty stuffing to welcome you."

That evening a very large gathering assembled in the public bar of "The Corner House," and the men of standing were introduced each in turn to Mr. Fogo. He had changed his attire and produced from the box of many nails a rusty brown coat, a shirt with a frill and black knee-breeches. Thus attired, he suggested some pettifogging attorney from the beginning of the century. He sat by the fire, smoked a clay and conducted himself with the utmost affability. He was, in fact, no greater than common men while ordinary subjects were under discussion. Only when the Prize Ring began to be talked about, did the aquiline and historic Fogo soar to his true altitudes and silence all listeners before the torrent of his discourse.

The visitor drank gin and not much of that. He was somewhat silent at first until Reuben explained his many-sided greatness; then, when the company a little realized the man they had among them, he began to talk.

"The Fancy always felt you was unlike the rest," said Shillabeer. "Even the papers took you serious. There was pugs and there was mugs; there were good sportsmen

and bad ones, and there were plenty of all sorts else, but never more than one 'Frosty-face.'"

Mr. Fogo nodded.

"I can't deny it," he said. "'Twas my all-roundness, I believe. Fight I couldn't—not being built on the pattern of a fighting man, though the heart was in me; but I had a slice over my share of wits, and I'd forgot more about the P.R. than most people ever knew before I was half a century old."

"You must understand," said Shillabeer to his guests, "that Fogo always had letters stuck after his name, for all the world like other learned men. They was complimentary and given to him by the sporting Press of the kingdom."

"Quite true," said Fogo. "I was D.C.G., which stood for Deputy Commissary-General—the great Tom Oliver of course being C.-G. We had the handling of the stakes and ropes of the P.R. from the time that Oliver fought his last serious fight in 1821. He's a fruiterer and greengrocer now in Chelsea, and a year or two older than me."

"Then you was—what was it—P.L.P.R.—eh?" asked the "Dumpling."

"I was and still am," returned "Frosty-face," proudly. "P.L.P.R.—that's 'Poet Laureet of the Prize Ring.' And it may interest these gentlemen here assembled to know that many and many a time my poems about the great fights was printed in the sporting papers afore most of those present was born or thought of."

"I hope you've brought some along with you," said Reuben.

"Certainly I have—a sheaf of 'em. I never travel without them," returned the Londoner. "And when by good chance I find myself in a bar full of sportsmen of the real old sort, like to-night, I always say to myself, 'Not a man here but shall have a chance of buying one of the poems on the great fights, written by old 'Frosty-faced Fogo.'"

"And you never fought yourself, Mr. Fogo?" asked David Bowden, who was of the company.

"Never in a serious way," answered the veteran. "There wasn't enough of me."

"I can mind when you come very near a mill though," declared Shillabeer. "'Twas after the fight between Tim Crawley and Burke, and the rain was coming down cats and dogs."

Mr. Fogo lifted his hand.

"Let me tell the story, 'Dumpling.' Yes, 'twas in

1830 at East Barnet, and 'the Deaf 'Un,' as Burke was called, had Master Tim's shutters up in thirty-three rounds. Then, afore I'd pulled up the stakes, if that saucy chap, Tommy Roundhead, the trainer, didn't come on to me with a lot of his bunkum. I was on the losing side that day and not in the best temper; but I let him go a bit and then gave him some straight talk; and 'Dumpling' here will tell you that as a man of forty my tongue was as ready as my pen. Anyhow, I touched Roundhead on the raw and lashed him into such a proper passion that nothing would do but to settle it there and then in the old style. Tommy put down his five shillings and I covered it, though nobody knew 'twas the last two half-crowns I had in my fob at the time. But I was itching to have a slap at the beggar, and into the Ring I went and shouted for Roundhead. Raining, mind you, all the time—raining rivers, you might say. Well, up hops Roundhead, stripped to the buff and as thin as a dead frog; and when the people saw him in his skin and counted his ribs, they laughed fit to wake the churchyard. But thin though Tommy was, I knew right well that I was thinner. However, I cared nothing for that, and was just getting out of my togs, when some reporters and other chaps, having a respect for me as a poet and a man in a thousand, came between and wouldn't hear of it.

"'What about my five bob?' I said. 'D— your five bob, "Frosty,"' they said. 'Here's ten.' And so, without 'by your leave,' they thrust me back into my clothes and dragged the arm out of my 'upper Benjamin' in doing it. 'Twas just the world's respect for me as a maker of verses, you might say, that kept me out of the Ring that day. So I soon had the true blue stakes up and went off with 'em; and the ropes and staples and beetle, and all the rest of it."

A warlike atmosphere seemed to waken in the peaceful bar of "The Corner House." The youths imagined themselves engaged in terrific trials of strength; their elders pictured the joy of playing spectators' parts. Mr. Fogo told story after story, and it seemed with few exceptions that the heroes of the ring, tricky though they might be in battle, were men of simple probity and honourable spirit. His great hero was "Bendigo," William Thompson of Nottingham, a Champion of England.

"And 'Bendy's' going strong yet," said Mr. Fogo. "After his last fight with Paddock, about ten year ago now—a bad fight too—'Bendy' won on a foul; after that he got converted, as they say, and took to preaching. He's at it yet and does pretty well, I believe."

"'Bendy' with a white choker! What a wonder!" declared Mr. Shillabeer.

"Yes—he met a noble lord last time he was in London," continued Mr. Fogo. "And his lordship recognized him for all his pulpit toggery. 'Good Gad!' says his lordship, 'tis "Bendy"! And what's your little game now, my bold hero?' 'Not a little game at all, my lord,' says 'Bendigo'—always ready with a word he was. 'I'm fighting Satan, and I'm going to beat him. Behold, my lord, the victory shall be mine,' he says in his best preaching voice. 'I hope so, "Bendy,"' answers his lordship; 'but pray have a care that you fight Beelzebub fairer than you did Ben Caunt, or I may change my side!' Not that 'Bendigo' ever fought unfair; but he had to be clever with a giant like Caunt; and he had to go down—else he'd have stood no chance at all with such a heavy man."

"One of three at a birth 'Bendy' was," concluded the "Dumpling." "I never knew one of triplets to do any good in the world before."

At this juncture in the conversation Bartley Crocker entered the bar. He had not heard of the celebrity, but soon, despite his own cares, found himself as interested as the others. The talk of battle inflamed him and, to the delight of the guests assembled, a thing most of them frankly desired actually happened within the hour.

David scowled into Bartley's eyes presently, and the younger, who was quite willing to pick a quarrel with this man of all men, walked across the bar and stood close to him.

"Is there any reason why you should pull your face crooked at sight of me, David Bowden?" he asked.

Something of the truth between these two was known. Therefore all kept silence.

"'Twas scorn of you made me do it. A chap who could kiss a girl, without asking if he might, be a coward."

"Bah! that's the matter—eh? Because I kissed your sister!"

"Yes; and if you think 'twas a decent man's act, it only shows you're not decent. Shame on you—low-minded chap that you are!"

"Not decent, because I kissed a pretty girl? D'you mean that?"

"Yes, I do."

"Did Rhoda tell you?"

"Yes, she did—when I axed her what ailed her."

"Well, hear this. You're a narrow-minded, canting

fool; and if women understood you better, you wouldn't have won Madge Stanbury."

"Don't you name her, or I'll knock your two eyes into one!"

"Do it!" answered Bartley; "and if that'll help you to start, so much the better."

As he spoke and with infinite quickness he raised his hand and pulled David's nose. A second later they were in the sawdust together.

The huge Shillabeer pulled them apart, like a man separates a pair of terriers. Then Simon Snell, Ernest Maunder and Timothy Mattacott held Bartley, while, single-handed, the "Dumpling" restrained young Bowden. Immense excitement marked the moment. Only Mr. Fogo puffed his long clay and showed no emotion. A senseless babel choked the air, and then Shillabeer's heavy voice shouted down the rest and he made himself heard.

"I won't have it!" he said. "I'm ashamed that you grown-up chaps can sink to temper like this and disgrace yourselves and me and the company. Strangers present too! If you want to fight, then fight in a decent and gentlemanly way—not like two dogs over a bone."

"I do want to fight," said Bartley. "I want nothing better in this world than to give that man the damnedest hiding ever a man had."

"And I'm the same," said Bowden. He was now quite calm again. "I'm sorry I forgot myself in your bar, Mr. Shillabeer, but no man can say I hadn't enough to make me. I'll not talk big nor threaten, nor say what I'll do to him, but I'll fight him for all he's worth—to-morrow if he likes."

"Now you're talking sense," declared the innkeeper. "A fair fight no man can object to, and if it's known in the proper quarters and not in the wrong ones, there ought to be a little money moving for both of you. How do they stand for a match, Fogo? Come forward, David, and let 'Frosty-face' have a look at you."

"Let 'em shake hands first," said Mr. Fogo.

"I'll do so," declared Bowden, "on the understanding that we're to fight this side of Christmas."

"The sooner the better," retorted Crocker. Then they shook hands and Mr. Fogo's glittering eyes inspected them.

"Weight as near as can be," he said. "At least, I judge it without seeing your barrels. This man's the younger, I suppose."

He pointed to Bartley.

"I'm twenty-five," said Mr. Crocker.

"Ay; and stand six feet——?"
"Five feet eleven and a half."
"Weight eleven stone?"
"A bit less."
Mr. Fogo nodded.
"You've got the reach, t'other chap's got the powder."
Then he examined David.
"Age?" he said.
"Twenty-eight."
"Height?"
"Five foot nine."
"Weight?"
"Eleven two, or thereabout."
"Do either of you know anything of the art?"
"I don't," said Bartley.
"No more don't I," added Bowden.
Fogo looked them up and down carefully.
"There's no reason on the surface why you shouldn't fight a pretty mill."
"How long can you stop with me, 'Frosty'?" asked Mr. Shillabeer.
"Well, if there was a few yellow-boys* in it, I might go as far as three weeks. I ought to see Tom King about something of the greatest importance before long; but I can write it. If these chaps will come to the scratch in three weeks, I'll stop. And they both look hard and healthy; and as neither of 'em know anything, it may be a short fight."
Much talk followed and, in the midst, the visitor rose, put down his pipe and left the bar."
Then up spoke Ernest Maunder in the majesty of the law.
"I warn you, souls," he said, "that I can't countenance this. If there's to be fighting, you've got me against you, and to-morrow I shall lay information with the Justice of the Peace and get a warrant out."
"I hope you'll mind your own business," said Crocker, warmly. "The man who spoils sport when Bowden and me meet, is like to get spoilt himself."
"You won't frighten me," returned Ernest. "As a common man I'd give you best, Bartley; but in my blue and with right my side, you'll find me an ugly customer, I warn you. Bowden here was daring me to be up and doing a bit ago. Well, you'll soon see how 'tis if you try to plan to break the law and fight a prize fight in this parish! I know my business, and that you'll find."

* Yellow-boys = Sovereigns.

"And I'm with you," declared Mr. Moses. "Have no fear, Maunder. The Church and the State are both o' your side, and let vicar but get wind of this and he'll——"

"You keep out of it, Moses," said Mr. Shillabeer, warmly. "We be very good friends and long may we remain so; but stick to your last, shoemaker, and if these full-grown men be pleased to settle their difference in the fine old way, 'tis very churlish in you to oppose it."

"Well said, 'Dumpling,'" shouted a young, odd-looking, hairy man with the uneuphonious name of Screech; "if Moses here don't like fair play and Nature's weapons, let him keep out of it; but if he tries to interfere, never a boot do he make for me again."

"Nor yet for me," cried Bowden. "You'll do well to go back on that, Mr. Moses, and keep away from the subject."

"Nor yet for me," echoed Timothy Mattacott, firmly. "I'm Maunder's friend, as you all know, and hope to remain so. But if there's to be the glad chance of a proper prize fight in this neighbourhood, I'm for it heart and soul."

Mr. Fogo had returned and heard some of this conversation.

"If the gentleman's a Jew," he said, "he ought to take kindly to the sport. Some of the best boys as ever threw a beaver into the Ring were Israelites—only to name Mendoza and Dutch Sam and Barney Aaron, 'the Star of the East.'"

"I'm not a Jew," said Mr. Moses, "though I don't blame you for thinking so."

"Not with that name?"

"Not at all. My people are Devon all through."

"Well," said Fogo, "my humble custom is to make hay while the sun shines. We Cockney blokes learn that quite as quick as you Johnny Raws from the plough-tail; and as there's a fight in the air, I'll be so bold as to sell a few of my verses to them brave blades that would like to see what fighting was once."

On his arm he carried fifty broadsheets, and now the old sportsman began to distribute them.

"Twopence each, gentleman—all true and partickler with the names of the Fancy present: Mr. Jackson, Mr. Gully, Tom Cribb, Jem Burn, Tom Spring, and all the old originals. The poems go from the first fight that I ever saw between Hen. Pearce, 'the Game Chicken,' and that poor, old, one-eyed lion, Jem Belcher, in 1805; to the great mill between Mr. Sayers and Mr. Heenan a year ago, when our man fought the Yankee with one hand and

jolly near beat him at that. All out of my own head, gentlemen, and only twopence each!"

Mr. Fogo distributed his warlike verses in every direction; then when not a poem remained, he began to collect them again. But the company proved in very vein for these lays of blood. Both the future combatants made several purchases; Mr. Snell also patronized the poet, while Mattacott, Screech, and even Mr. Maunder himself, became possessed of "Frosty-face's" sanguine chronicles.

It being now closing time, the storm-laden air was cleared; the noisy company, with laughter and repetition of racy couplets from Mr. Fogo's muse, retired, and at last the two old friends were left alone. Shillabeer shut up his bar and locked the house; "Frosty" counted the contents of his pocket and gathered up the poems still unsold.

"I ought to share the booty with you, 'Dumpling,'" he said, but his host scorned the thought.

"Hope you'll be sold out long afore you go," he returned. "And as to sharing, that's nonsense. You're a great man, and if you be going to stop along of me for three weeks, you'll bring a lot of custom, for the people will come from far and near to see you."

"Of course if you put it that way, I say no more, because you know best," declared Fogo.

Presently they sat together over a final pipe.

"Now talk of the wife," said Reuben.

Mr. Fogo obeyed, cast his acute countenance into a mould of melancholy, appeared to draw a film over his piercing eyes, ceased joyously to rattle the money in his breeches pocket, and shook his head sadly once or twice, to catch the spirit of the theme.

"The biggest and the best woman I ever saw, or ever hope to see," he began. "I picture her now—as a young, gay creature in her father's shop at the corner of the Dials. Rabbits and caveys and birds he sold, and him a sportsman to the marrow. Thirteen stone in her maiden days, they used to say, and very nearly six feet high—the wonder and the joy of the male sex. And 'twas left for you to win that rare female. And you did; and you was the envied of London, 'Dumpling'—the envied of London."

Mr. Shillabeer nodded, sighed heavily, and licked his lips at these picturesque words.

"It brings her back—so large as life to hear you tell about her. 'Twas the weight she put on after marriage that killed her, 'Frosty,'" he said. "You must see her grave in the burying-ground."

"And take my hat off to it—so I will."

"There's room for me beside her come my turn, Fogo."

"Quite right—perfectly right. You couldn't wait for the Trump of Doom beside a better woman."

Reuben next gave all details of his wife's last illness, and the subject occupied him until midnight when conversation drifted from Mrs. Shillabeer to other matters. They talked until the peat fire sank to a red eye and the air grew cold. The conversation waned and both heroes began to grow sleepy.

Mr. Shillabeer rose first and concluded the wide survey.

"Ah, 'Frosty,' the days we've seen!" he said.

"I'm with you," answered the poet, also rising. "'Tis all summed up in that word and couldn't be put better,—'The days we've seen!'"

CHAPTER X

SOME INTERVIEWS

THOSE from whom it was most desired to keep all information of the coming fight were the first to hear of it. Mr. Moses told Mr. Merle, the vicar, and Mr. Merle resented the news bitterly. He decided, indeed that such a proceeding would disgrace the parish.

"We might as well revive the horrors of our bull-ring," he said. "It cannot and must not be."

The good man referred to a considerable tract of ground beneath the southern wall of the churchyard—a region known as the "bull-ring" and authentically connected with obsolete sports.

Ernest Maunder was most unfortunate in the ally that he had expected to win. Sir Guy Flamank, the Lord of the Manor, though enrolled on the Commission of the Peace, was before all else a sportsman, as he declared at every opportunity. Somehow this gentleman, by means mysteriously hidden, became aware of the little matter in hand on the very morning after the arrangement, and though Ernest called at the Manor House, he found the Justice unable to see him. Thrice he was thus evaded, and when once he met Sir Guy on horseback, Mr. Maunder could not fail to mark how the knight retreated before him with obvious and paltry evasion. That a Justice of the Peace could thus ignore his responsibilities, caused both Mr. Maunder and Mr. Moses much indignant uneasiness.

At breakfast on the day after his undertaking, David Bowden announced the thing he intended to do; and while his mother wept some natural tears, nobody else showed any sorrowful emotion. Indeed Elias was grimly glad.

"Well done thou!" he said. "I've long wanted for some son of mine to show me a bit of valour above common, and now 'tis left for the eldest to do it. You'll trounce him to the truth of music, for there's a tougher heart in you than that man, and you've lived a tougher life."

"What'll Madge say?" asked Dorcas.

"She needn't know about it," declared David. "We're to fight in about three weeks, and the day's to be kept a secret as long as possible."

"What d'you want to fight for?" asked his mother.

"It's natural. We can't be friends no more till we've had it out. You see, he was after my Madge, and I bested him, and—besides—I had another crow to pluck with the man."

A martial spirit awoke at the Warren House and Mr. Bowden frankly revelled in this business, the more so because he believed that his son must win easily. The twins took to sparring from that hour, and Napoleon and Wellington fought their battles over again. Elias sent to Plymouth for a pair of boxing gloves, and Joshua, for the good of the cause, albeit not fond of hard knocks, stood up to David for half an hour each day. It was arranged that young Bowden should train at home for a fortnight and then go to Plymouth and put himself in the hands of a professional at that town for some final polish.

The brother and sister had a private talk of special significance soon after the making of the match.

David met Rhoda returning from Sheepstor, and her face was grave.

"I've just heard more about that business than you told us, David," she said. "'Tis as much for what he done to me as anything, that you be going to fight him."

"No matter the reason. A licking will do him good—if I can give him one."

"Look here," she said—impulsively for her—"I must be in this fight. You're everything to me, David—everything. I can't keep away and I won't keep away. You know the sort of pluck I've got. Well, I must be in that Ring—me and father——"

David gasped.

"Would you?"

"I tell you I must. Something calls out to me to do it. You can't fight without me there, and I don't believe you can win without me. I swear I feel it so. Wouldn't you rather have me in your corner than any man if it comes to that?"

"Yes," he admitted, "I would; but you can't do what's got to do."

"I can do all," she replied. "I talked to Mr. Shillabeer to-day, when I'd made up my mind, and I axed him what the bottle-holder have to do; and he told me. I can do it all—every bit of it."

"You shall then!" said David.

She flushed with pleasure.

"You won't regret it. I may help you to win a bit. A woman that can keep her head, like I can, is useful anywhere."

"'Twill be you and faither—and I suppose that Crocker will have the 'Dumpling' and this queer, old, white-headed London man on his side."

"I'm gay and proud as you can trust me in such a thing," she said, her breast heaving.

"Yes—and now I think on it—you and me being what we are each to t'other—I *will* have it so. I couldn't fight all I know if you wasn't there, Rhoda. But I warn you, 'tis ugly work. You mustn't mind seeing my head knocked into a lump of black and blue flesh."

"That's naught so long as you win. 'Twill come right again."

"But I may not win. You never know how the luck will fall."

"You must win," she answered. "'Tisn't in Nature that such an evil man as him can beat you."

"I shan't stop so long as I can see, or so long as I can stand," he said. "I think I shall win myself, but it don't do to brag."

Then Rhoda told him something that disturbed him not a little.

"Margaret Stanbury knows about it," she said. "I met Mr. Snell, and he was full of it, and we had a tell. Then he told me that Timothy Mattacott was out Down Tor way, and met Madge, and went and told her. So you'll have to calm her down somehow."

"Better you do," he answered. "'Tis a woman's job. Get over this afternoon, like a good girl, and just make light of it. Tell her I'm coming across o' Sunday but can't sooner."

Rhoda obeyed and later in the day saw Madge. David's sweetheart was tearful and much perturbed.

"'Tis all my fault," she said. "Oh, Rhoda, can't nothing be done to stop it? Such terrible strong men—they'll kill each other."

"No, they won't; and 'tisn't all your fault," answered the other. "It had to come off afore they could be friends again. 'Tis to be a fair, stand-up fight; and the best man will win; and that's our David. Don't take on and make a fuss afore him, if you want to keep friends with him. David's like faither, all for valour. He'll be vexed if you cry about it. Time enough for us to cry if he's worsted. But he won't be."

"'Tis hard for me, because I know 'em both so well," said Margaret.

"And 'tis easy for me, because I know 'em both so well," answered Rhoda. "No man ever wanted his

beastly nature cooled down with a good hiding more than what Bartley Crocker does. And, be it as 'twill, 'twas Crocker that made the fight, not David."

"I shall go mad when the day comes," said Margaret.

"No, you won't, because you won't know the day. 'Tis to be kept a dark secret. And I'm going in the Ring to look after my brother."

"Rhoda!"

"I am, though. He wants it. He will have it so."

"Be you made of iron?"

"Yes, where David's good is the matter. He wants me there—and there I shall be."

"The men will hoot you—'tis an unwomanly thing."

"D'you think I care for that, so long as I know it isn't?"

"If any woman's to be there, 'tis his future wife, I should think," said Madge; but Rhoda laughed.

"You! You'd faint when—but there, don't think no more about it. Men will be men, when they're built on the pattern of David. I come from him to tell you not to fret, so mind you don't."

"'Fret!' I shall fret my hair grey, and so will mother," said the promised wife. "To think of his beautiful face all smashed about—and Bartley too—both such good-looking, kindly chaps! What ever do they want to fight about? Can't they settle their quarrels no other way?"

"You should know 'em better. 'Tis a deeper thing than a quarrel. If they are to be friends, they must hammer one another a bit first. Why not? You puzzle me. Do 'e want 'em to have their minds full of poison to each other for evermore? Better fight and let it out."

"I shall pray David, if ever he loved me, not to do it."

"Don't," said Rhoda. "Don't be a fool, Madge. I know David better than what you do; and, if you're that sort, you never will know him as well as I know him; because you'll vex and cross him and he'll hide himself from you. He's a strong, hard man and straight as sunlight. If you're going to be soft and silly over this, or over anything, you won't make him love you any the better. Take my advice and try to feel like I do—like a man about it. It's got to be, and if you are against it and come to him with a long face and silly prayers not to fight for your sake, and all that stuff, you won't choke him off fighting, but you may choke him off——"

"'Off me' you were going to say. Well, that's where I know him better than you do, for all you know him so well, Rhoda. But don't think I'm a fool. 'Tis natural

I don't want the dear face I love to be bruised by another man's fist; but if 'tis to be—'tis to be. I only ask to know *why* 'tis to be. I suppose David can tell me that?"

"We'll leave it so then, since you don't know why," said the other. "How's the pup? Have it settled down?"

But if Margaret Stanbury viewed this battle with dismay, her emotions were trivial compared with those of Bartley Crocker's mother and Bartley Crocker's aunt.

In vain did the fighter try to keep his great secret from them. It was impossible, and Mr. Moses laid every detail of the proposed encounter before Nanny two mornings after he had heard about it.

Bartley was from home when Charles Moses arrived, and the shoemaker harrowed and horrified his two listeners at leisure. Such palpitation overtook Mrs. Crocker, that the very cotoneaster on the outer walls seemed to throb to its berried crown; while as for Aunt Susan Saunders, having once grasped the nature of the things to be, her heart quite overcame her and she wept. But the mother of Bartley wept not: she panted—panted with wrath till her expansive bust creaked. Her anger flowed forth like a tide and swallowed first Mr. Shillabeer and the low characters he encouraged at "The Corner House"; next, David Bowden and his family; next, the Stanburys, who doubtless were deeply involved in this contemplated crime; and lastly, the aged stranger, Mr. Fogo, concerning whose bloodthirsty and blood-stained career Charles Moses had dropped some hints. Her son Mrs. Crocker blamed not at all. She scoffed at the notion of her innocent and amiable boy seeking to batter any man.

"Bring me my salts, Susan, and don't snivel," said the mother. "For Bartley to be up in arms like this here—why, I never will believe it! And me a bailiff's daughter, as everybody knows, and him with the blood of the Saunders family in his veins. They've harried him into it along of his pluck and courage; but it shan't be if I can put my bosom between him and bloodshed. Bartley to be struck and assaulted by a warrener, and a common man at that! Wasn't it enough thicky, empty-headed wench at Coombeshead chose that yellow-haired Bowden, when she might have had a Crocker? And now, if you please, the ruffian, not content with getting the girl, wants to fight my boy!"

"It's my duty to tell you, ma'am, that your son's quite as set on it as t'other," declared Mr. Moses.

"No doubt; and a good whipping he'd give the man

if it came to it; but it mustn't come to it. We're in a Christian land, and this firebrand, that's crept among us with his wicked rhymes, ought to be taken up and led behind the cart-tail and flogged out of the parish."

"I'm glad you take such a high, womanly view," said the shoemaker; "because you'm another on our side, and will be a tower of strength. They are to fight in about three weeks' time—afore Christmas. That is, if we, on the side of law and order—namely, his reverence, and me, and you, and Ernest Maunder, can't prevent it. I'm sorry to say everybody else wants to see them fight—even Sir Guy—more shame to him!"

"I'll have the place by the ears rather than it should happen," said Mrs. Crocker. "I'll have Bartley took up rather than he should have his face touched by that—that rabbit-catching good-for-naught up to Ditsworthy. Why, I'll even go up there myself and talk to Elias Bowden. This thing shan't be—not if a determined woman can prevent it."

Mr. Moses retired comforted in some sort, for he felt that Mrs. Crocker was probably stronger than the policeman and the vicar put together. But meantime, on the other side, matters developed steadily. Shillabeer and "Frosty-faced Fogo" had taken charge of Bartley Crocker, and he prepared for battle with the benefit of all their immense experience. From the first, rumours of interference and interruption were rife; but Fogo treated them with disdain.

"Leave all that to me," he said. "I've been evading the 'blues' and the 'beaks' ever since I came to man's estate, and if I can't hoodwink you simple bumpkins—parsons and all—well, I'll pay the stakes myself."

For stakes there were, and Mr. Fogo, who insisted on seeing all things done decently and in order, arranged that five pounds a side should be posted to bind the match and five pounds more paid in the day before the battle. Mr. Bowden found the money for David, and no less a worthy than Sir Guy Flamank himself, having first commanded terrific oaths of secrecy from Mr. Fogo and Mr. Shillabeer, produced ten pounds for Bartley Crocker. He was young and had never seen a fight.

A great many local sportsmen evinced the keenest interest in the proceedings, but with British hypocrisy strove hard to conceal that interest, out of respect to the people who were not sportsmen. As for the combatants, to their surprise they found themselves rapidly developing into men of renown. Even the hosts of the lesser Bowdens

were received with respect among their friends, in that they happened to be actual brothers of a hero. It might have been remarked that while most people at first expected Bowden to win, the larger number coupled the prophecy with a hope that they would be mistaken. From the beginning Bartley was the more popular combatant; and when certain opinions respecting him left the narrow lips of Mr. Fogo at "The Corner House," a little betting opened and ruled at two to one on the younger man.

Mr. Shillabeer set to work to teach Bartley the rudiments, but he found himself too slow and scant of breath to be of any service. A young boxer from Plymouth was therefore engaged—he who in Mr. Fogo's skilful hands had won a recent battle—and he swiftly initiated Crocker.

And then it was that the Londoner pronounced this raw material in many respects above the average, and declared that Bartley, among his other qualifications, had some unsuspected talent for milling. He was quick and very active on his legs. He hit straight naturally, not round. His left promised to be very useful and he had a vague idea of hitting on the retreat and countering—arts usually quite unappreciated by the novice. In fact, Mr. Fogo, from an attitude of indifference, presently developed mild interest in the coming battle and was often at hand when Bartley donned the mittens. He also superintended his training, and bore him company, for a part of the distance, on some of those lengthy tramps prescribed by Mr. Shillabeer.

Upon one of these occasions, however, Bartley was alone and chance willed that he should meet Margaret returning from Ditsworthy. She was depressed and he asked her why.

"For fifty reasons; and you know most of 'em," she answered. "I've just been eating dinner to the Warren House. Somehow it always makes me wisht. There's that young fellow, by the name of Billy Screech, running after Dorcas, and none of 'em like him or will hear of such a thing. And then the silence! They won't talk afore me. You can hear every pair of teeth working and every bite and sup going down. But that's not what's on my mind. 'Tis this awful fight. Oh, Bartley, can't you make it up?"

"We have, long ago. We're quite friendly. 'Tis no more now than a sporting fixture for ten pounds a side. There'll be twenty pounds more for furniture for your new home, Madge—if I'm licked."

"Don't talk like that. 'Twould always be covered wi' bloodstains in my eyes. Can't you use the gloves?

Why do you want to knock your poor noses crooked for? 'Tis like savage tigers more than Christian men."

"Don't you worry. The colours be coming Monday. Of course I can't ask you to wear mine; but they're prettier far than David's. 'Twas Mr. Fogo's idea. I shall have the same as the mighty champion, Ben Caunt, once had."

"I don't want to hear nothing about it, and I pray to God every night on my knees that it may be stopped."

"Well, you'll be proud of one of us," he said. "I can't expect you to want me to win; but you mustn't be very much surprised if I do. This old Fogo finds I've got a bit of the right stuff in me; and for that matter, I've found it out myself. I take to it like a duck takes to water. I've always been fond of dancing—nobody knows that better than you—and dancing is very helpful to a fighter. To hit and get off without being hit back—that's the whole art of prize-fighting, and I'm afraid I shall hit David twice to his once."

Instantly the lover came to Madge's heart, despite herself.

"He doesn't brag," she said. "He's very quiet and humble about it. But maybe you'll find he can hit too, Bartley, though I grant you he can't dance."

He laughed and left her then; and next day as the pugilist from Plymouth had to return home about his business, an experienced local called Pierce, from Kingsett Farm, near Crazywell, on Dartmoor, was prevailed upon to assist. He and Crocker set to steadily. But Pierce was nearly forty, and too small for Bartley; therefore the lord of the manor himself filled the breach. Not, indeed, that Sir Guy Flamank put on the gloves; but he found a large-limbed youth down for Christmas from Oxford, who was the heavy-weight champion at that seat of learning, and this skilful youngster gave Bartley some invaluable information.

Little was known respecting David's progress; but Elias Bowden made the acquaintance of "Frosty-face," and provided this celebrity with one or two days' sport on the warren. Mr. Fogo proved no mean shot, and among other game of a good mixed bag, two wood-pigeons and three golden plover fell to his borrowed weapon. He discussed the Prize Ring for the gratification of Mr. Bowden on this occasion, but though David's father tried hard to learn how Bartley was coming on in his training, Mr. Fogo's silence upon that theme exceeded even the customary taciturnity of the Warren House. He was only concerned with the growing rumours of organized interference, yet he

assured Mr. Bowden that the fight would certainly come off, at a time and place to be arranged by him and Reuben Shillabeer.

It is to be noted that Crocker had now left his home altogether, and was living at "The Corner House." The high-handed attitude of his mother and her immense energy and indignation rendered this step necessary. The reminder that his grandfather had been a bailiff lacked force to shake Bartley from his evil determination; therefore she threatened to disinherit him, and hinted at incarceration and other vague counter-strokes. But when day followed day and nothing moderated his intention; when she saw that he had given up malt liquor and spirits; that he insisted on certain foods; that he rose at reasonable hours and took an immense deal of active exercise—when, in fact, she grasped the truth that her only son meant to fight a prize-fight, and was taking every possible precaution to win it, then she broke down and threatened no more, but became hysterical, melodramatic and mournful. It was enough that he entered the house for Nanny to fling herself into an attitude of despair. Her appetite suffered, her sleep suffered, even her spirits suffered. From being a dictatorial and assertive woman, who used her personality like a pistol, she grew meek, mild and plaintive. She wearied her hearers; she filled Susan's ears with pathetic details concerning her wasting flesh, and begged her to report them again to Bartley. Thus her son learned that his mother's stockings had become too large for her attenuated calves, and that her dresses were being taken in many inches as the result of a general atrophy of tissue produced by his behaviour. Nanny's eyes haunted him. She had, moreover, an art to drop tears exactly at those moments when he cast a sly side glance at her face. She would drop them on to her work, or her plate, or into her tea.

These distressing circumstances finally ejected Bartley from the maternal threshold. He saw his mother daily, but felt that until the battle was lost or won, he could endure her constant remonstrances no more. He strove to make her take a sterner view, and she assured him that had she not been a woman of gentle birth, it might have been possible; but from one with the delicate Saunders blood in her veins, only a genteel outlook on life could be expected; and there was no room for tolerance of prize-fighting in that survey.

CHAPTER XI

MR. FOGO IS SHOCKED

"FROSTY-FACE" very naturally looked to it that this little encounter of rustics should have some useful bearing on his own affairs. He was a poor man and could not afford to ignore opportunities. With Mr. Shillabeer he set about reviving all the glories of the twenty-four-foot square, and he was determined that nothing should be omitted which could make the approaching fight a dignified and successful entertainment, worthy, in its small way, of the best traditions.

Before a full bar Mr. Fogo spoke at length. He had sold thirteen of his poems that evening, and he was now about to unfasten a parcel that day received from London; but, before doing so, he outlined the situation.

"I'm very pleased to find you know a bit down here," he began. "There's more of the right sort in these parts than we might have expected, and there'll be a good sprinkling of Corinthians at the ring-side too. The doctor from Tavistock, who is going to referee, is as spicy a dare-devil as I wish to meet at any mill; and he knows his job; and afterwards, if either of you chaps want to be blooded, he can do it for you."

"We shall judge of the patronage by the number of fogles the swells take up," said Mr. Shillabeer. "You see, the old rule is that a fighter gives his colours to all who'll take 'em; and it's understood that if he's beat, the colours cost naught; but if he wins, everybody as took a handkerchief be expected to pay a guinea for it."

"Well, here they are," answered "Frosty-face." "I got 'em myself so cheap as they could be got through a friend. Fifty there are—twenty-five for each of the men—and, if they go off, I can get more at the same low figure."

He opened his parcel and revealed the colours. Bartley and several of his friends were present; but David, who was to call that night with his father, had not yet arrived. Mr. Crocker's handkerchief was much admired. It showed a rich orange centre bordered with three inches of purple.

Both Fogo and Shillabeer took one, though not on the usual understanding, and Bartley calculated that he knew about twenty sportsmen, including Sir Guy, who would be glad to possess this memento of the battle.

Then came the Bowdens, and the future combatants shook hands in a friendly spirit and compared their colours. David's were simpler and quieter—a blue "bird's-eye" with a white spot. Both parties could number a good handful of patrons, and the encounter, albeit date and place were still kept a dark secret, promised to be well attended.

"I'm painting the true blue stakes myself," said "Frosty-face," "and we'll have a nobby ring if we don't have a nobby fight in it."

"And where is it to be, Mr. Fogo?" asked Simon Snell.

"I wouldn't tell everybody, but you shall know," answered the old man, assuming a grim expression which always preceded his finest jokes. "We'll have our turn up in the bull-ring, Mr. Snell. It have seen many a bit of fun, they tell me, so why not a bit more?"

Everybody laughed, because Sheepstor bull-ring was the most public spot for many miles round. It lay under the churchyard wall at the centre of the hamlet.

"Couldn't choose a better place, all the same," said Reuben Shillabeer, "that is, if they'd let us alone. The burying-ground runs eight feet above the ring; and there's good grass there, and a nice tilt to the gound, and proper trees all round for the sporting public to climb into. However, that's rather too warm a corner for modest men. We don't want the eyes of the nation on us."

"Leave it to me," said the Londoner. "There are certain people we shan't have no use for on the morning of the fight. And if they stop at Sheepstor, 'tis clear we must go somewhere else. However, look to me; I'll give you the office in plenty of time."

"You'll never get round parson and Mr. Moses and p'liceman and Mrs. Crocker," foretold Tim Mattacott.

"I fear but one of 'em," answered Mr. Fogo. "They are all harmless men, and I can handle 'em as easy as a mother handles her tenth babby. 'Tis that spry lady will take some stopping. I've not got the length of her foot yet—to say it with all respect. But all in good time."

"There's to be a sermon preached by Mr. Merle next Sunday against this here fight," said Mr. Bowden. "I'm sorry to the bone that he's taken this view, because I never like to quarrel with my betters; but to the House of the Lord me and mine go as usual next Sunday and whatever he may preach won't change my opinions."

"And I'll go too," declared Fogo. "Yes, I'll go and hear his argeyments. 'Tis a good few years since I was in a place of prayer—in fact, never since I stood best man when Alec Reid, 'the Chelsea Snob,' was married. But

on Sunday I shall be there, and you'll see I can shut my eyes and sniff my hat with the best among ye."

"You shall come along of me," said the "Dumpling." "I go most times and get a deal of good from it. My wife was a steady church member, for though she'd fling off to chapel for change now and again, as women will, yet she comed back again and again to the Establishment; and she died in it, and Parson Merle will tell you'twas so."

Then exploded suddenly a piece of news that quite staggered and shocked the renowned visitor. It also cast down Mr. Shillabeer, for he felt that Fogo, as a man, and the P.R., as an institution, were alike insulted by such an astounding assertion from the rival camp.

The question of seconds had been raised and Mr. Fogo explained that he and Shillabeer proposed to look after Crocker.

"I shall carry the bottle and offer advice as it's called for, and Reuben will pick him up and give him a knee," he declared.

"If he wants it," added the "Dumpling"; "but unless David here be cleverer than we think he is, Bartley won't ask for much picking up."

"And who are going to look after you?" asked Fogo of David.

"My father and——"

"He can't pick you up. Who else?"

"And my sister, Rhoda Bowden—a stroug maiden. She and father will do all that's got to be done."

"Blow my dickey!" said Mr. Fogo, "that's the first knock-down for you anyway. A woman—a woman in the P.R.! You really thought that? That's the best joke I've heard since '45."

"It's settled," said David, calmly.

"A woman in the P.R.!" repeated Fogo. "Well, I've seen most things during the last seventy years, but not that. Why don't you ax your sister to fight for you?"

"Look here," said the elder Bowden, "I won't have nothing said in this matter by you or anybody, Mr. Fogo, till you see for yourselves. Anyway it's going to happen."

"I quite agree!" declared Mr. Snell, suddenly. "Miss Rhoda's a born wonder and a most renowned creature for courage. None ever was like her. A female no more feared to look on blood than we be to count our wages. And as to picking him up, she could pick him up—and you too, Mr. Fogo, as easily as I can turn a stop-cock."

"Can such things be?" asked Mr. Fogo. "This bangs Bannagher! A woman—a young, female woman inside

the P.R.! 'Tis enough to provoke the anger of Heaven. May I die like a trundle-tailed cur, with a brick round my neck, if I could ever stand it!"

"'Tis my girl that you saw up to the Warren House," said Mr. Bowden, "her you said was a very fine woman, and you wished you'd got such a pair of arms."

"Her with the chin?"

"She have a chin, I grant you."

"And who haven't?" asked Mr. Snell.

"You must know 'tisn't a common case," explained David. "My sister and me be very close friends, and she's terrible interested in this fight, and, in short, she'll have to be there—there's no law against it."

"I'm shocked," said the old man. "'Tis a very indecent, outrageous thing, and I protest with all my might. A petticoat in the P.R.! Can't everybody in this bar see it's all wrong and disgraceful and disorderly?"

"In a general way it would be," admitted Shillabeer; "but she ain't no common young woman, 'Frosty,' and I'm not surprised to hear she means it. She was axing me what a bottle-holder be expected to do a bit back-along; and I half twigged that she'd got this idea in her noddle."

"Then it's the end of the world," declared Mr. Fogo. "I ask for nothing more. Perhaps our man wants his mother in his corner—also his aunt? I'm sure they very much wish to be there by all accounts."

"Since the fight be in part about my sister, she's a right on the spot," said David; "and this I'll tell you, Mr. Fogo: though you laugh, you'll see what she's like in the Ring; and if she does one thing—one single thing—she shouldn't, and fails of aught where a man could do better, then I'll give you the stakes if I win 'em."

"It's contrary to all history and law and decency and Nature. It isn't possible, I tell you. Here am I trying to revive the P.R. in a first chop, gentlemanly fashion, and then you yokels plan a sin and a shame like this," said Mr. Fogo. He was very much annoyed and returned again and again to the threatened female incursion. Most of the company agreed with him; indeed, only the Bowdens and Simon Snell supported Rhoda as a second. Mr. Shillabeer was doubtful.

"Be there any law against it? That's the question," he said. "Well, I can't say there is, 'Frosty.' Of course there's naught in the rules about it."

"Because the rules was drawn for respectable law-abiding people," answered Mr. Fogo.

They wrangled on, while David and Bartley spoke aside.

"Did you say that Miss Rhoda was really interested?" asked Crocker. "I shouldn't like to think that, David. I know I kissed her, like a silly fool, in the Pixies' House that day of the storm; but she don't bear malice, I hope, any more than you do?"

"Oh, no—no malice. It angered her cruel all the same, as it did me; and she won't be sorry to see you lose—though there's no malice—certainly not."

"You're in luck with such a sister and such a wife to be."

David changed the subject.

"Have they settled where 'tis to come off?"

"No—only the day."

"Monday week?"

"Yes."

"I'm going down to Plymouth Monday to practise with the boxers there," said David, and Bartley nodded.

"They'll larn you a lot," he said.

Mr. Fogo's voice again rose in wrath.

"The Fancy won't stand it. Mark me; they'll hiss her out of the Ring. Such a thing won't be suffered in a Christian land."

The hour grew late and Mr. Maunder looked in somewhat coldly. Since his vital difference of opinion on the subject of the prize-fight, he had withdrawn his patronage from "The Corner House." It was felt that he could hardly be present in the camp of a combatant until the matter of the pending battle was at an end.

"Closing time, Mr. Shillabeer," he said, and the "Dumpling" nodded.

"Right you are, Ernest. Come in and take a thimbleful along with me, won't 'e?"

"No, thank you. Not till this business is over. I'm against you, and I won't have bit or sup along with the enemy. I speak as the law, Shillabeer, and not as a man. Of course *afterwards* I shall come back again; but not till I've bested you, or you've bested me."

"Nobody could speak fairer," declared Mr. Shillabeer.

Then the company departed; Bartley Crocker went to bed; and Reuben asked his friend what steps he proposed to take with respect to evading the police on Monday week. But Fogo was in no amiable or communicative mood. His feelings had that night been much lacerated and the prospect of seeing a woman in a prize ring affected him acutely. He would not talk about the matter, and when Mr. Shillabeer, according to custom, brought conversation round to his vanished partner over the last

glass, Mr. Fogo failed of that tact for which he was renowned and refused even to speak well of the deceased.

"I've heard enough about women to make me sick of the name of female this night," he said. "I won't utter a word more about 'em, living or dead. Thank my stars I kept single anyway. They may be all right in their proper place, but they don't know the meaning of fair play, and are worse than useless in every branch of sport that man ever invented. You mark me: this man's sister will come across the ring and try to gouge our eyes out if her brother's getting worsted!"

"Not she," promised the "Dumpling." "I grant 'tis a sign the P.R.'s coming to naught that a chap should have his sister to second him in a fight; but since it had to be, never was a woman built more likely to give a good account of herself in that place than Rhoda Bowden."

"Well, I hope to God the Fancy will rise like one man," answered Mr. Fogo. "And now I'll go to my bed; and if I don't have a nightmare and dream that I'm in a Ring along with the Queen of England and a few duchesses and other high female characters, may I be blowed from here to the top of Paul's cathedral and back again."

He then retired.

Bowden and Crocker had both paid for their colours and Mr. Shillabeer called his friend back to hand him the money, which, in his misery, Mr. Fogo had forgotten.

CHAPTER XII

FOR THE GOOD CAUSE

PROBABLY the Prince of Darkness himself had won little more profound attention than Mr. Fogo when, in his cape and black knee-breeches, the old sportsman attended divine service on the following Sunday. Those interested entirely attributed the forthcoming fight to him, and many of the mothers and grandmothers of the hamlet would have been well pleased to mob "Frosty-face" and drive him by force of arms from the village.

One painful interview with Bartley Crocker's mother he had not been able to escape. She offered him ten pounds in gold to prevent the fight, and when he explained that not for a hundred or a thousand pounds would he be party to a "cross," she had "given him a bit of her mind and threatened him with her ten commandants," as he afterwards expressed it.

And now, Mr. Fogo, supported by Mr. Shillabeer, sat at worship, answered the responses and even essayed to join in the hymns. The behaviour of both old men was marked by highest propriety; and both put a penny in the plate, when it reached them. The Bowdens, including David, were also present, and Mr. Fogo's sole acts of inattention were caused by the circumstance that Rhoda sat beside her father. He stole several glances at her, and observed a powerful, handsome young woman, exceedingly self-possessed and apparently well able to keep her nerve under any circumstances. He admitted to the "Dumpling" that in an ordinary emergency or difficulty Miss Bowden might probably hold her own; but a prize-fight was not an ordinary emergency, and he held that, under no conceivable tangle of circumstances, should a woman, in any capacity whatsoever, be present at such a proceeding.

Mr. Merle preached, or it would be more correct to say thundered, from a peaceable text in the New Testament. He hit hard and spared not. From the lord of the manor to the landlord of "The Corner House," he ranged; and he called heaven to witness that, for his part, no stone should be left unturned to overthrow the forces of disorder. Incidentally Mr. Merle gave his hearers a picture of a prize-fight, for it appeared that in his degenerate Oxford days the pastor had witnessed a battle.

"One of the unhappy creatures who marred God's own image on that occasion was called Peter Crawley and known to his friends by the vulgar sobriquet of 'Young Rump Steak,' " said the clergyman. Then, glaring at his congregation as though to dare a smile, he pulled his black gown from his wrists and proceeded: "The name of the other pugilist was Jem Ward, and they met on a winter's day within a hundred miles of London——"

"At Royston—I was there," whispered Mr. Fogo to Reuben Shillabeer. Both old men paid the preacher every attention.

"Their degrading operations were considered to constitute a pretty day's sport," continued Mr. Merle. "These men battered and tore and dashed each other upon the earth time after time. Again and again they fought themselves to a standstill, which is, I believe, the technical expression for absolute physical exhaustion. It was a battle of ferocious fiends disguised as men, and when this Peter Crawley had stricken the wretched Ward senseless in the eleventh round; and when both were reduced to mere swollen, half-blind palpitating masses of bruised and bleeding flesh, the people present shouted with infamous joy and bore both combatants away in triumph from the ensanguined field."

"Jem lost all along of not having Tom Oliver for second," whispered Fogo.

The clergyman proceeded at considerable length to point his moral, and he wound up an eloquent appeal with special allusion to the stranger who had come among his sheep. He did not actually describe "Frosty-face" as a wolf; but he left no manner of doubt as to his opinion of the Londoner; and he expressed acute regret that this Philistine should be spending his leisure in Sheepstor, to the debasement of the youth and manhood of the district.

Mr. Fogo listened with attention and propriety; while Mr. Shillabeer, fearing what might happen, rolled uneasily, puffed, perspired and grew red at intervals.

Of the principals and those who intended to aid them, only Bartley Crocker was not present; but his mother heard the sermon, and the vision of Peter Crawley and Jem Ward caused her to become so faint, that she had to be helped into the air by Charles Moses long before the sermon was finished.

Mr. Fogo himself and the company of the Bowdens accepted all the vicar said without emotion. Only once, when he quoted Horace, did they lose him for a moment. Elias Bowden had long convinced himself that a fair

stand-up fight, between men pretty closely matched, was a circumstance morally justifiable in every respect; and his children accepted this conclusion without demur. As for "Frosty," his deep mind moved far too busily with the future to trouble about any harsh present criticisms, personal and public though they might be. He saw in Mr. Merle's attitude an opportunity that he sought, and after the service was ended, he bade Reuben Shillabeer get home and leave him behind. Then, when most of the people had gone; when the Bowdens, full of this charge, trailed up to Ditsworthy; when the "Dumpling," in great uneasiness, got him back to his public-house; and when the congregation of chattering women and dubious men had vanished this way and that, Mr. Fogo prevailed upon Mr. Moses to introduce him to the vicar. The Rev. Theodore Merle was a solid, plethoric parson of the old school—a pillar of Church and State, loud-voiced, red-faced, kind-hearted, narrow-minded and conservative.

Mr. Fogo saluted this gentleman with the greatest deference, and briefly explained that his discourse had caused him deep interest and touched his conscience very forcibly at certain points. He then begged to know if he might, at the vicar's convenience, enjoy a little private conversation.

Mr. Merle gladly consented to go at greater length into the matter with the old stranger. He named the following evening for their meeting at the vicarage, and expressed a hope that he might yet lead the Londoner from his turbulent and unlawful ways.

Mr. Fogo replied that if any man had the art to do such a thing, it must be Mr. Merle, whose eloquence had deeply impressed him. He then bowed in a very courtly manner and withdrew. Afterwards, he secretly confided to the shoemaker, that the sermon had left him in great doubt of his conduct, and he very patiently suffered Charles Moses to press the case for law and order without offering much in the nature of opposition. He hoped finally that Mr. Moses would make it convenient to be present at the meeting with Mr. Merle; and the cobbler, firmly convinced that "Frosty-face" was yielding, promised to oblige him.

At "The Corner House," in public, Mr. Fogo maintained a taciturn attitude, and when invited to express an opinion on the sermon, replied that there was a good deal to be said on both sides. Mr. Shillabeer smelt mystery, but knew his friend's ways too well to interfere. At present the event stood fixed for an early hour on the following Monday week, and Mr. Fogo was prowling about the neighbourhood

to find a secluded and suitable theatre for it; but nothing had been settled, and not until the Tuesday before the fight did he make the final announcement.

Mr. Fogo had already kept his appointment with Mr. Merle and listened to the arguments of the vicar and the churchwarden.

"I may tell you that the lord of the manor has only just left me," remarked Mr. Merle. "He, too, has harboured some erroneous opinions on the subject of this outrage, and I have gone far to convince him of his mistake."

But Mr. Fogo knew all about the opinions of Sir Guy Flamank. Indeed, he had enjoyed a considerable discourse in private with that sound sportsman only a few hours earlier in the day.

"Sir Guy Flamank," said the vicar, "at first argued speciously that there are times when a magistrate ought to act, and times when he ought to shut his eyes, or look the other way. Deluded by fanciful obligations to the claims of sport, he supposes that this is an occasion for looking the other way. But he is wrong—ignorantly, rather than wickedly, wrong—and I have thoroughly convinced him of the fact. A fight between two men, no matter whether they fight in the spirit of friends, or avowedly as foes, is none the less legally a breach of the peace, morally an outrage on the Creator. It is an unchristian, a brutal, a degraded performance, even though we regard it not as a battle of enmity but a trial of strength. Who are we that we dare to deface the image of God? Tell me that, Mr. Fogo. A prize-fight is the most complicated and many-sided offence it is possible to conceive—an affront alike on man and his Maker. None can attend such orgies without lowering his sense of decency, and manhood; none can be present at such a spectacle and not suffer for it in the secret places of his self-respect. In the interest of public morals and of religion I take my stand, Mr. Fogo; and as a minister of the Word of God I tell you that, Heaven helping, this thing shall not be within my spiritual jurisdiction—nay, or beyond it, if energy and foresight can prevent."

Mr. Fogo rose from the chair whereon he sat, and bowed.

"I have not heard such burning words, your reverence, since I sat under a bishop a few weeks ago in Paul's, London. I would have you to know that I take life seriously. I am a pious man, though my calling has to do with rough characters; but I never saw things quite in this light before. We sporting blades mean no harm, and we are

honest according to our lights. I've known many of the noted pugs and can assure your reverence that they are straight and kindly men—just such good souls as Mr. Shillabeer, my friend in this village. If they've done wrong, 'tis through their ignorance of right. And as for me, never, until I heard your great and forcible discourse o' Sunday, did I think that a fair mill was not agreeable to the morals of the kingdom, even though the law don't allow it."

"A prize-fight is not agreeable—either to the morals of this kingdom or the next," said Mr. Merle; "and I hope you are convinced of it."

"You told me you was," said Moses. "You made it very clear to me you was wavering, Mr. Fogo."

"I am wavering," answered the old hawk, while he tried to cool the fire in his eye with a film of piety. "I am hit very hard over this. You've let in the light on me, your reverence. It calls back to my mind that famous party, namely Bendigo—once a Champion of England, now a champion of the next world; for he's taken to preaching and, as he told me last time we met, is under articles to fight the Devil and all his works. A great man in his way, and they've given his name to half Australia, I'm told; but, though very free and forcible with words, he hasn't got the flow of your reverence. Of course you wouldn't expect it from a prize-fighter. And now with your solemn speeches booming on my sinful ears, I ask myself what I am to do."

"Let me tell you the answer to that question, Mr. Fogo," said the clergyman, very earnestly. "If your conscience has been mercifully permitted to waken at my voice, take heed that it shall not sink to sleep again. Emulate your reformed friend, Mr. Bendigo. Put on the armour of light and the breastplate of righteousness. Look back at these days of seclusion in this rural scene as Paul looked back to that journey on which burst in the dazzling light of living truth. Let the scales fall from your eyes, Mr. Fogo. Choose the better path, henceforth, sir. You are an able man. I can see it in your face. There is intellect there. With greater advantages you might have made a mark in the world and assisted its welfare. And that you must and shall still do! There is none among us so humble but that he possesses the grand, the glorious privilege and power to help the world towards goodness. Act rightly in this matter and great will be your reward—if not in this world, my dear friend, none the less and of a surety in the world to come."

"Exactly so," said Mr. Fogo. "I know you're right—I'm sure of it. You understand these things—nobody better. It is your holy calling so to do. I see now, as never I saw before, that fighting oughtn't to be. I almost begin to believe that it's my duty to stop this fight. And yet——"

"Don't dally with the idea, Mr. Fogo," urged Charles Moses. "Believe it once for all and do your duty. Your salvation may hang upon it!"

Mr. Merle was a little vexed with the warden's interference. He put up his hand and said, "Hush, Moses; leave this to me, please."

"It's like this," explained "Frosty-face," mildly; "most of the males are for the fight; most of the women are against it. And his reverence here is against it, and you're against it, Mr. Moses, and of course the constable is against it, being paid by the nation to be so. Well, I must tell you that in these cases, if the police appear on the ground, the fight is always stopped at once and the Fancy goes off—either into another county, where the warrant don't hold, or else, if that's impossible, they stop altogether till the next meeting is arranged by the referee. Now, in this business, the fight has either got to stop or not begin at all if the police put in their appearance, because there's no getting into another county; so it all comes to this: if your reverence knows when and where the fight is to take place, you can stop it."

"Then your duty stares you in the face, Mr. Fogo. You must tell me," asserted Mr. Merle.

"It isn't decided yet."

"You'll have a hand in the decision, all the same," declared Charles Moses. "Very like they'll look to you to settle that point, as, with your learning of such things, would be natural."

Mr. Fogo glanced round about him as though he feared an eavesdropper.

"If I do this, and tell you the battle-ground, will you promise never to let it out?" he asked.

"It will be for you to let it out, and triumph in your righteous action," said Mr. Merle.

"Well, I'd rather not," answered the Deputy-Commissary, with frankness. "I'll do good by stealth, and 'twill be quite time enough for me to write and tell Mr. Shillabeer that 'twas my work after I've got back to London out of harm's way. So there it stands: you've conquered me, your reverence. I put myself in your power. But this is thirsty work—this well-doing. Might

I make so bold as to ask for a drop of liquor—spirits, if they may be taken without harm in the dwelling of holiness ? "

Mr. Merle went to his sideboard and got a bottle of whisky, from which the repentant Fogo helped himself to a stiff glass.

" On Monday next at eleven o'clock the fight will begin, unless we stop it," he said. " And since, in the high name of the church and parson, it did ought to be stopped, stopped it shall be. The place is still a secret. But this I'll do for the sake of my own salvation, and other reasons, including my great respect to your reverence—this I'll do: on Monday morning next, at cock-light or earlier, I'll be here in secret to meet the police and his reverence and Mr. Moses; and I'll lead them to the ring. That's the work of your Sunday sermon on the heart of a sinful creature, parson Merle. At five o'clock next Monday I'll be at this house; but I trust those present to keep the secret, for if a word is breathed and it gets out, there's men interested in this fight that will change the 'rondeyvoo' and hide it even from me."

The clergyman, elated, yet not without secret doubts, gave all necessary promises, and Mr. Moses did the like. Then Mr. Fogo went his way.

He was in church again next Sunday and, meantime, conducted himself in a manner that mystified most frequenters of " The Corner House." Shillabeer declared that something was weighing on Mr. Fogo's mind, and Moses, who heard rumours, carried them to the vicar.

Then came grey dawn on the eventful morning and, before it was yet light, " Frosty-face," as good as his word, arrived at the vicarage.

Mr. Ernest Maunder, with the warrant and another constable, had already arrived, and a moment later Mr. Moses came on the scene. The first glimmer of light was in the sky and the day opened cold and clear. Stars shone overhead and the road tinkled with ice underfoot; but clouds were already banking against the northern horizon.

" I'm here to take you to the appointed place," said Fogo. " All is settled and the men are to be in the ring before eleven o'clock. You will be snugly hidden not a hundred yards from the spot when they begin. 'Tis Ringmoor Down has been chosen—alongside the wood at the west end by the turnpike. We can't miss it, because the ring was pitched overnight—I helped, so as not to bring down no suspicion on myself."

They started silently to climb the steep hill that ascends out of Sheepstor to Ringmoor. At Fogo's advice they carried food and drink with them, for the morning was very cold and laden with promise of snow.

"You mustn't mind hard words," said the betrayer. "They can't do nothing to any of you, because it's a fair score and you've won for two reasons. Firstly, by having more wits in your heads than them, and secondly, because his reverence has converted me to see the truth. I'm the only one as would be roughly handled and very likely—an old man like me—get my death from it; so I shan't stop for the great moment when you step forth in the name of the Queen's Majesty and bid 'em all to keep the peace. I shall see you in your places, and then I've arranged for a trap to come for me to the pike, and off I go to Plymouth. I won't face the music—why should I? As it is, I shall go in fear and trembling this many a day."

"You need neither fear nor tremble, Fogo," said Mr. Merle. "The mind conscious of rectitude is armed against all fear. You have done your duty, difficult though it was; you will have your reward."

"Thank you for that helpful word," answered "Frosty-face"; "and I beg, if your reverence don't find it too much for your bellows against the hill, that you'll speak a few comforting speeches to me as we travel along. I'm an aged man to turn from vanity at my time of life; yet in your sermon yesterday you said 'twas never too late to mend, and I took that to myself."

"You were perfectly justified in so doing," said Mr. Merle.

He uttered exhilarating reflections until the severity of the hill reduced him to silence. Then Ernest Maunder, who had not yet recovered from his amazement at finding Fogo a traitor, asked him a question.

"If you're going straight away off to Plymouth, what about your luggage?"

"You'll see it in the trap," answered "Frosty." "I've got a box and a bundle and no more. Mind, Constable Maunder, that you step boldly into the ring; and don't do it too soon. Wait till the men have stripped and shook hands. Then out you go, and not a man dare withstand you. Have no fear for yourself. At their everlasting peril would they do it, for you are the State. 'Twill be the greatest moment in your life, and I hope you'll bear yourself with dignity."

"I hope I shall," replied Mr. Maunder; "but 'twould be easier if 'twas milder weather."

Dawn rolled along Dartmoor edge as they reached the silent hill-top and it revealed an unfamiliar object upon the featureless bosom of Ringmoor. As Fogo had foretold, distant one hundred yards from a little wood beside the highway, the twenty-four-foot ring stood stark in the twilight of morning. Heavy stakes, painted blue, supported the ropes. An outer ring—to keep spectators clear from the fight—was also set up beyond, and the ground could not have been better chosen.

Close at hand an open trap was waiting, and the driver stamped up and down to keep himself warm. Mr. Maunder, with a flash of professional zeal, satisfied himself that "Frosty's" luggage was really in this vehicle and marked a wooden box, studded with brass nails, and a parcel containing a large umbrella and some walking-sticks.

"I got my kit out last night, after Shillabeer had gone to his rest," explained Mr. Fogo. "This morning he'll think that I've risen betimes and come up here—and he'll think right, for that matter."

In half an hour the party had cut down some boughs of fir, made a screen against the north wind, and hidden themselves carefully at the edge of the wood. Then Mr. Fogo joined the vicar in a light breakfast of hard-boiled eggs and cold tea; and finally he prepared to take his leave.

He declared that he left for Plymouth with reluctance and would much have liked to see the triumph of right; but, in plain English, he feared greatly for his own skin if the disappointed sportsmen discovered him with the police. Therefore he bade all farewell, invited and obtained Mr. Merle's formal blessing upon his future, and then drove away along the road to Plymouth.

Yet, for some private and obscure reason, when a mile had been traversed, Mr. Fogo appeared suddenly to change his mind. He directed the driver to sink down to Meavy valley; and thence the trap returned as swiftly as possible to Sheepstor.

Already that village was awake and alert. Strange men moved about through it; within the field, under the churchyard wall, had sprung up a square of ropes and bright blue stakes—the counterpart of that beside which Mr. Merle and his friends were waiting and growing somewhat cold on the sequestered loneliness of Ringmoor.

Mr. Fogo had told Simon Snell the truth, though his listeners all laughed at the joke when they heard it. The fight, instead of taking place upon Ringmoor Down at eleven o'clock, was planned for Sheepstor bull-ring at nine.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIGHT

THE bull-ring of Sheepstor is a grassy field of near an acre in extent, surrounded west and east with beech trees, hemmed by a road and a little river southward, and flanked by the churchyard wall on the north. Here bull-baiting, cock-fighting, cock-shying, and other rough sports of our great-grandfathers were enjoyed ; and here, on this winter morning, one of the last authentic prize-fights ever fought in England was duly conducted with all right ritual, pomp and circumstance, under direction of that high priest and poet of the P.R., "Frosty-faced" Fogo.

From Lowery and Kingsett by Crazywell ; from Yellowmead and Dennycoombe ; from Meavy and Middleworth and Good-a-Meavy those in the secret came. A large sprinkling of local sportsmen rode into Sheepstor before eight o'clock and stabled their horses at "The Corner House." Sir Guy Flamank's friend, the young boxer from Oxford, and a Plymouth professional, were umpires for the men ; while the sporting doctor from Tavistock acted as referee on the strength of wide experience and sound knowledge.

Bowden and his party came down from Ditsworthy in a cart, and beside it walked Bartholomew Stanbury and his son. Simon Snell also arrived, with Mattacott, Screech and other local men. Just before nine o'clock two stout and frantic women rushed to the rectory and then disappeared up the hill towards Ringmoor. They were Mr. Crocker's mother and aunt.

As for Bartley, he arrived in the bull-ring at five minutes to nine, met David beside it and shook hands with him and his father. Rhoda stood by, clad in a dark stuff dress with short skirt and short sleeves. On her head was a man's cap and her bright hair had been coiled small and tight on her neck. She paid no attention to Mr. Crocker. Then Fogo appeared and assumed command. With him came the Corinthian contingent, jovial and jolly, clad in the most showy and stylish sporting costumes of the "sixties." The colours of both men were generally displayed.

"Throw your castors in the ring," said Shillabeer, and the fighters dropped their hats over the ropes.

The Fight

A crowd of above a hundred persons was assembled. The front row sat ten feet from the ring ; others stood behind them and twenty men clustered along the churchyard wall. Into the beech trees many boys had also climbed. Rhoda Bowden was the only woman present. Many protested and shook their heads, but none interfered.

The colours were tied to the stakes and the combatants tossed. Bowden won, and his father chose the corner with its back to the rising sun. Red light ranged along the eastern edge of Dartmoor ; but it promised swiftly to perish, for the air was already heavy with coming snow.

Both men now stripped to the waist. They wore flannel drawers, socks, and shoes with sparrow-bill nails in them. Each was clean-shaved and close-cropped. Fogo and Shillabeer, with bottles, towel and sponges, entered Bartley's corner, while his father and sister took their places in Bowden's.

As the church clock struck nine the men came to the scratch, listened to a brief word from the referee and again shook hands. Each in his different way looked strong and well. David's white body shone in the red sunlight and showed a silky texture over the big muscles. He was shorter in the reach than Bartley Crocker and far sturdier below the waist. Big thews and sinews held him up ; but, as he came on guard, he shaped rather awkwardly with his hands and his head was somewhat too far forward. Crocker appeared slighter, taller and more graceful. His brown body seemed somewhat thin about the ribs, but his face was clean and hard and his eyes bright. His legs were not so solid as David's, but they showed more spring about them. His pose was good : he carried his head well back, and his hands neither too high nor too low. One man obviously possessed greater strength ; while the other looked likely to be quicker both on his legs and with his fists. What either had learned about scientific fighting in the short time of preparation remained to be seen. Both were nervous and both were eager to begin.

David dashed out at his man and hit with his right, but was parried. Again he tried his right, rather round, and just touched Crocker's shoulder ; whereupon Bartley hitting straighter, got his left on the other's face and followed it with his right on the throat. The second blow was heavy and shook David for a moment. They stood apart, then both began to fight desperately, but with little science. Some tremendous counters succeeded and each received a few blows in the face ; but Bowden evidently hit harder than the younger man, though he did not get

home so often. The little knowledge either possessed belonged to Crocker. He guarded to some purpose with his left and avoided one or two strong, right-handed blows in this manner. Twice Crocker missed his right; then the best blow of the round was struck by him. It fell fairly and full on David's forehead, and he followed it by another, under the eye. Then Bartley received one on the nose which drew blood. A moment later the men closed and Crocker threw Bowden with an ordinary cross-buttock and fell on him. Both walked to their corners and the round ended with nothing of importance done on either side. First blood was claimed and allowed for David.

Bartley sat on Mr. Shillabeer's knee, while Mr. Fogo polished him up and poured advice into his ear.

"Keep moving more," he said. "Dance 'Jim Crow' round the man! make him come after you and blow him a bit. He hits harder than you do; but he's not as clever and not as long in the arm. Get on to the right eye again. If you can shut that at the start, it's worth half the stakes."

And elsewhere David reposed on Elias Bowden's knee while Rhoda, white to the lips, but firm as a rock, sponged his face. He laughed at her.

"It's all right," he said to his father. "He only hit me once worth mentioning. I'll soon find his measure. I'm stronger than him."

"Don't talk," answered the old man. "And get the fall, if you can, next round. Better you drop on him than he drop on you."

The half-minute was over and both came instantly to the scratch. Preliminary nervousness had passed and they were eager to fight. David panted a little; Bartley appeared quite calm. The second round began with Bowden leading off; but Crocker easily jerked his head out of harm's way and escaped an ugly round hit.

They fell to heavy milling of a scrambling character, with few blows getting home on either side. Presently they stood apart, panting with hands down a moment; then, in response to shouts from partisans, they began to fight again. Crocker now had the best of it until the end of the round. David seemed unable to use his left and Bartley was learning to avoid the swinging round-arm blows delivered by his opponent's right. Thrice he escaped these attempts and each time countered with his own right. To Mr. Fogo's satisfaction one of these blows reached the damaged eye with great force and instantly raised a big "mouse" beneath it. Then the round ended, almost exactly like the last, by David landing on the other's nose

and drawing a copious flow of blood. Upon this they closed and David tried hard for the crook, but Bartley was the cleverer wrestler and Bowden went down with the other on top of him as before. Again they walked strongly to their corners and their friends did all that was necessary in the space of thirty seconds.

"Fight for his eyes, and even take a bit of risk to get there," said Mr. Fogo. "But, for the love of the Lord, don't let him land that round-arm hit on your ear. It won't do you no good. And use your left more."

Rhoda bathed the curious blue mark that had leapt into existence under her brother's eye. His face was puffy round it, but neither she nor her father guessed at the threatened danger. As for David, he was very cheerful and only vexed that he had missed so often with his right.

"I've got to get nearer to him," he explained. "Outfighting's no good against his long arms. I must go inside 'em and see what I can do then."

The men smiled and nodded at one another as they came up to time.

Bartley began with his left. David threw it off well with the right guard and tried to begin in-fighting, but the taller man danced away before him and hit twice, right and left, on the retreat. Then Bowden, coming with a rush caught him, and the finest rally of the battle followed. The combatants fought all across the ring with both hands almost entirely at the head. More by good chance than science each stopped some heavy hits and sparred much above their true skill. Immense applause greeted the round, and the "Dumpling" bellowed a word of encouragement to his man. Fogo watched every move with his old, keen eyes. He was not entirely pleased with the result of the round. It ended in a scrambling fall with no advantage to either. But both, though blowing heavily, were still strong, and each man rose instantly and got back to his corner without aid.

The little advantage of the rising sun in his opponent's eyes was now lost to Bowden, for grey clouds had swallowed the morning and already a few stray flakes of snow fell leisurely. Elias, at the end of this round, complained that Crocker was holding some hard substance within his fists, but Fogo with disdain showed that they carried paper only.

Some marks of the last bout were visible when "time" brought the men to the scratch. Bartley had a cut on his forehead and another on his cheek-bone, while his

nose and lips had swollen and become distorted; the eyelids of Bowden's right eye were puffed and bulged. His face and breast were mottled with red; but Crocker, on the contrary, was as pale as a parsnip. David led off right and left, just touching with the first but missing with the latter. They countered heavily and then, in obedience to orders, Crocker got in suddenly, caught David's head in chancery, and before the elder, by sheer strength, broke loose, fibbed him thrice. Mr. Fogo rolled in an ecstasy. The blows had reached David's sound eye and done some damage. In getting away David fell and Bartley immediately went to his corner. The round had been much in his favour.

Rhoda worked hard to reduce the swelling on her brother's face, but it was not possible. He continued strong, cheerful and impatient to repay a little of Crocker's attention in the last round.

Yet from this point the fight went steadily in favour of the younger man. He was naturally quicker, neater and straighter in his hitting. The next round was a long one. David got to work first and lashed out as usual with his right, but was short. Then Bartley retreated until he had his enemy on the move, whereupon he stood and let fly both right and left at the head. Both told, though the blows were light. David slipped on to one knee but was up again instantly, and a moment later, for the first time since the beginning of the battle, he got his right home on Crocker's ear. The hit fairly staggered Bartley but did not drop him. He recovered before Bowden could repeat the blow and some furious fighting brought the men into Bartley's corner, where David had the worst of the rally. Crocker at last closed and might have gone far to end the fight, for he had his enemy on the ropes and was about to punish him in that position. His instinct, however, prevented it. He had raised his right and Bowden was for the moment defenceless; then the younger drew back and shook his head. "Nay, David," he said, "I'll not take advantage of thee."

A hearty cheer greeted this sportsmanlike act; but in his corner at the end of the round, Mr. Fogo took occasion to caution his man against further display of such a spirit.

"You haven't got him beat yet," he said. "'Tis all very well to play to the gallery when you're safe, but not sooner. He's harder than you and will take a lot of knocking out. You had it in your power then to give him pepper, and you ought to have done it till he dropped.

Fight for his eyes and don't let's have no softness. You mind there's a lot of money going to change hands over this job, and you've no right to throw away half a chance."

In answer Crocker showed temper.

"I'll fight fair and be damned to you and your London ways," he said; but Mr. Fogo permitted himself no retort.

A great deal of tedious sparring occurred in the next round and Bowden got his second wind. He was strong and still confident, but the sight of his right eye grew much impaired. After a time the pace quickened, but when they began to fight in earnest, the round was Bartley's own. David received all the hits, and one on the mouth nearly floored him. At the end they closed and Bowden was thrown. Both still went to their corners without help.

Five and six to one were betted on Crocker, and even Fogo felt sanguine. But he had time to take close stock of his man and noticed that Crocker was weaker.

In the next round the men closed almost instantly and went down, David undermost.

"All Dartmoor to a lark-sod on our chap!" said Mr. Shillabeer. "Go in and finish him, Bartley. Only get on his left peeper again and the shutters will be up. The right's done for."

"I can do it, but I'm frightened to—might blind him for life," answered the fighter; and "Frosty-face" was frantically expostulating at this mistaken sentiment at the call of "time."

Heavy counter-hits were exchanged in this round and Bartley's left ear was again visited. Blood sprang from it in answer to the blow and for a moment he was dazed; then he hit David heavily on the neck and jaw. A rally followed and Bartley used his legs and got away. At the end Crocker hit out with his left and caught David on his sound eye. The blow was well timed and Bowden nearly fell. A moment later they closed and wrestled long for the fall. Neither won it decisively, but they went down together. Both were weak after this round and both, for the first time, were carried to their corners. Rhoda and her father lifted David swiftly and neatly.

Bowden began the next round and hit Bartley with right and left on the chest, but he made no impression though the blows were hard. Crocker, on the contrary, while lacking much force, yet planted one hit to purpose on Bowden's left eye. This stroke evidently caused great pain for, despite himself, David's hands went up to his face. Then it seemed that he began to realize his peril, for he fought desperately and showed tremendous energy

and renewed strength. A blow on the ribs made Bartley wince, but others as heavy missed him and his returns went over David's shoulder. Towards the end of the round, however, Crocker, catching the other, as he advanced and timing his right better than usual, sent Bowden clean off his legs with a flush hit on the mouth. It was the first knock-down blow in the battle, and Fogo waited with desperate anxiety and fervent hope that Bowden might not come up to time. But Rhoda and her father achieved the feat. Within the regulation eight seconds after time was called, David stood at the scratch. He was very shaky, but cheerful. He grinned out of his distorted features as Bartley approached and said, "Now I'm going to get some of my own back, Crocker."

Fogo, during the respite, had given his man brandy and implored him to try and finish before his strength was gone. The opportunity to administer a final blow had come. Bowden was shaken, and for the moment very weak. Alive to the situation, Crocker did his best; but now the man's own nature came between him and the necessity of execution. As he grew more feeble a vein of sheer sentimentality in his character asserted itself. For the moment he could not strike the bruised, bloody and defenceless eyes of the enemy. His gorge rose at the act. Between the rounds he had been watching Rhoda with a sort of vague, unreal interest. In his increased weakness, the whole business appeared like a dream out of which only Rhoda clearly stood. He admired her immense courage and pictured her secret emotions as round succeeded round, and she saw David's face being battered from all semblance of humanity.

Nevertheless, Crocker began this—the tenth round—with a determination to let it be the last. He hit out of distance but eventually struck Bowden on the nose. The blow was not heavy, but David went down and was carried to his corner.

Bartley stared across at his foe, while Fogo attended to him. He saw Rhoda sponge the other's face and speak to him. Then David laughed. The expression of amusement was hideous on his countenance in its present condition. Fogo kept speaking, but when he stood at the scratch Crocker quite forgot the last advice he had received. It was clear now that David was fighting for strength, and each round in the next five saw him go down at the least legal provocation. Some shouted scorn at him, but he paid no heed. He was hit several times during these rounds and did little in return; but once he visited Bartley's

damaged ear, and once he got a good cross-buttock and fell heavily on his man.

Seeing Elias and Rhoda busy with David's hand after the thirteenth round, Shillabeer whispered that the enemy's left was gone ; but he erred as the sequel proved. Bowden had only cut himself on Bartley's teeth.

Fogo, however, still felt satisfied, because it seemed clear that even if Crocker could not finish his task, he would be able to stay until Bowden went blind. David's right eye had long since closed and the left was beginning to vanish. Another blow would probably complete the work of obliteration and leave Crocker with victory. Both men's faces were much swollen and disfigured, but both were still game and both were cheerful. Bartley, however, began to get slow and his ear was causing him much dizziness. It had swollen to horrible dimensions.

Snow now fell briskly and the ring had become very slippery.

The sixteenth bout found David busiest. He rushed in right and left, and a good ding-dong round was fought in which advantage only came to Bartley at the end. Then, after receiving some heavy body-blows, he got on to Bowden's lip, split it and drenched the man's face with blood. In the close they both went down, David, as usual, undermost. Both were carried to their corners and both were weak.

In the next round David tried to upper cut Crocker, but missed, and was knocked down by a blow on the throat.

Elias asked his son if all was well with him, and David nodded. Rhoda gave him the brandy bottle and he rinsed his mouth, but did not drink any. Fogo did all that his knowledge suggested for Bartley, but knew that he was growing weak very rapidly. It remained to be seen whether Crocker's strength or David's eyesight would last longest.

In the eighteenth round Bartley began the fighting and with immense impetuosity dashed in right and left on the face. He tried for the eye, but just missed it and caught heavily on the body. And then fortune smiled in earnest on David, and as the other came again to finish his enemy at any cost, Bowden caught him with crushing force on the left cheek. Chance timed the blow to perfection. It was by far the heaviest hit in the fight, and the effect at this juncture proved terrific. The tremendous blow seemed to go all over the side of Crocker's face. It brought the blood gushing from his mouth and nose ; and it dropped him in a heap.

A shout of consternation rose from the younger man's friends, and Mr. Fogo and Shillabeer picked up Bartley, while David, cheered by the yells of his supporters, walked, with Rhoda guiding him, to his corner. It was now the turn of the Bowdens to wait the call of time with anxiety; but Fogo got his man to the scratch, though all fight was out of him. David could still see, but he had lost the power of calculating distances. He struck thrice in the air; then he hit Crocker, where he stood dazed with his hands down, and dropped him.

The crisis had come and Mr. Fogo kept back Bartley till the last available moment, while on the other side Rhoda led David to the scratch, for he could no longer see it. A blow now was likely to settle the matter; but the one man was too weak to strike, the other too blind to make sure of hitting. Two more rounds were fought in this manner and Fogo fancied that Bartley had a little recovered from the effects of his terrible punishment; but the return of strength did not serve him. In the twenty-second and final round Bowden—fortune still smiling—hit Crocker heavily with a round arm on the ear and the younger man fell unconscious. Fogo and Shillabeer picked him up and did what they could, but Bartley knew nothing. His head had swollen in an extraordinary manner from the smashing stroke in the eighteenth round, and it was that blow which had put paid to his account. David walked to the scratch with Rhoda's help and waited to hear time called. He had, it seemed, snatched victory at the last moment and now it was his battle as surely as it had been Bartley's after the ninth round. The referee cried "time," the eight seconds crawled past, and "Frosty-face" with a word not to be chronicled, threw up the sponge. Bartley Crocker was deaf to the call. Indeed, he remained unconscious for another five minutes.

The fight had lasted about three-quarters of an hour.

Then a roar rose round the ring and a hundred men and boys crowded in upon it. Many hastened away at once to avoid possible future trouble. Rhoda threw her emotions into one kiss that she pressed upon her brother's mangled mouth; then, rosy as her name, she walked up to the colours, unfastened them with unshaking, ensanguined hands, and tied them round David's neck. Many cheered her; and some fell in love with her from that moment. David, for his part, asked to be led to Bartley, and when, with the referee's assistance, the beaten man had recovered consciousness, Bowden held out his hand and Crocker took it.

By this time the winner was stone blind. His party stopped on the ground only a few minutes, during which Mr. Fogo, as became a poet, and a man of imagination, insisted on shaking hands with Rhoda Bowden.

"Woman," he said, "you're a wonder. I've never seen the like in seventy years; and I hope I never shall again."

Then David was led to the cart and, with his sister, three of his brothers and his father, drove off to Ditsworthy. A cheering mob of fifty men and boys accompanied him half way; the Stanburys—father and son—walked for some distance beside the vehicle, while one or two energetic spirits ran on ahead with tidings of victory for Mrs. Bowden and her daughters, Sophia and Dorcas.

Snow fell heavily now and detail was vanishing under it.

Mr. Fogo had no difficulty in explaining the defeat to the Fancy. He threw light upon the situation, while Mr. Shillabeer and others carried Bartley to "The Corner House" in a large wheelbarrow and put him to bed.

"'Twas just such a hit as the Tipton gave Tass Parker in their last fight—to compare small things with great," said Fogo. "When a man's shaky, a smack like that is a receipt in full. A pretty finish, but it ought never to have come to it. Bowden was beat half an hour ago, and if our chap hadn't been so milk-hearted, he'd be the winner this minute. If he'd had a bit of the other's kill-devil in him, 'twould have been all over long ago. He fought better and wrestled better; but there it was—the human nature in him couldn't punish, though the fight depended on it and t'other man was blind. He was never meant for a fighting man—more the dancing-master turn of mind."

"Very fond of the ladies, I believe," said Timothy Mattacott.

"So I've found; and if that amazing girl with the chin had been in his corner with me instead of the 'Dumpling,' I believe that Crocker would have won," declared "Frosty."

At this moment there hastened frantically down a hill from the south certain devoted peacemakers. Bartley's relatives had learned at the vicarage that Mr. Merle and others were gone at break of day to the pike by Ringmoor Down, and they had struggled upward with the fatal truth. Now it happened that these deceived upholders of the law came full upon Mr. Fogo and a select company, on their way to the inn. Whereupon the clergyman thrust among them and stood before Mr. Fogo, his face dark as a mulberry with rage.

"You infamous scoundrel!" he shouted. "What is the meaning of this?"

The old man stared blankly and unknowingly before him. Not a spark of recognition lighted his eagle features.

"I don't quite understand," he answered; then he turned to his friends.

"Who may these snowy gentlemen be?" he asked. "His reverence seems to be a little put out. But he's got a kind expression of countenance. If they wanted to see the mill, they ought to have started a bit earlier."

But then Mr. Fogo saw Mrs. Crocker approaching and he did not hesitate to run with his bodyguard about him.

Snow began to fall in earnest at last. Heavier and heavier it came, until Sheepstor and the churchyard and the bull-ring, with hills and valleys round about, vanished under a silent, far-flung cloth of silver. After all the riot and life, noise and blood-letting, peace fell like a pall at noon. The folk kept their cottages. Only at "The Corner House" persisted a mighty din and clatter of tongues, while the larder and many bottles were emptied, the barrels were heavily drawn upon, and the battle was fought and lost again a dozen times before nightfall.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

"MEAVY COT"

ON a day in summer, David Bowden wandered up the higher valleys of Meavy and stopped in a little dingle where the new-born river tumbled ten feet over a great apron of granite into a pool beneath. In four separate threads the stream spouted over this mossy ledge, and then joined her foaming forces below. Grey-green sallows thronged the top of this natural weir and the wind flashed a twinkle of silver into their foliage as the leaves leapt and turned. Low hills sloped to this spot and made a natural nest. Black Tor and Harter ascended at hand, and on the horizon northerly Princetown's stern church tower rose against the sky. Beside the pool, wherein Meavy gathered again her scattered tresses, an old ruin stood; and round about the dwelling-places of primeval man glimmered grey upon the heath.

David Bowden had chosen this spot for his home, and his reason was the shattered miner's cottage of Tudor date that rose there. Four-square, crowned with heather and fretted with pennyworts and grasses, stone-crop, grey lichens and sky-blue jasione, the old house stood. Broken walls eight feet high surrounded it; an oven still gaped in one angle, and the wide chimney-shaft now made a green twilight of dewy ferns and mosses. Bowden crept into the ruin and looked about him, as he had already done many times before. At his feet lay old moulds hollowed out of the granite; and where molten tin once ran, now glittered water caught from the last shower.

Since first he found the place, David, with his scanty gift of imagination, had pictured a modern cottage rising on these venerable foundations. And soon the thing was actually to happen. He knew that the hearth whereon his feet now stood would presently glow again with fires lighted by Margaret's hands; he thought of white wheaten loaves baking in the oven; he almost smelt them; and he saw above this loneliness the thin blue ringlets of peat smoke that soon would rise and curl on the west wind's fingers

and tell chance wanderers that a home lay hidden by water's brink in the glen beneath. The place was very sequestered, very remote from all other habitations; and he liked it the better for that. Here was such privacy as the man desired. Margaret would do her shopping at Princetown; and since she knew scarcely anybody there, the chances of gossip and vain conversation were small. His ambition was a life far from trivial social obligations and the talk of idle tongues. He desired opportunity to pursue success without distractions and waste of time. Whether this home might suit the sociable Margaret, he did not pause to consider. As for Rhoda, she would certainly be of his mind.

The facts that most impressed Bowden at the moment were certain loads of lime and sand, together with granite boulders, water-worn, from the stream bed close at hand. Materials for his house were already collected and the building of it was to begin during the following week. It would need five or six months to finish, and Bowden proposed to be married and settled in his future home before another Christmas came.

While he sat here now, slowly, solidly planning the future and waiting for Margaret to meet him, certain black-faced, horned sheep approached, drew up at a safe distance and lifted their yellow eyes to him inquiringly. David returned their regard with interest, for they were his own.

Presently came Margaret and he kissed her, then pointed with satisfaction to the preparations.

"They've kept their word, you see. Next week our house is to be started. There's a good bit of pulling down to do first, however. And Sir Guy have given way about that ruined spot t'other side the stream. It's going to be built again for a lew place for stock; and I'm to pay two pound a year more rent."

"'Twill be good for the kennel," said Madge. "Rhoda tells me as you'll have five or six dogs at the least for her to watch over, not counting 'Silky' here."

"Silky" had grown from puppyhood into adolescence. He was now a beautiful but a spoiled spaniel who never wandered far from his mistress.

Bowden looked down and shook his head at "Silky," where he sat with his nose between his fore-paws at Margaret's feet.

"A good dog ruined," he said. "If you was to do the proper thing, you'd let me shoot it. 'Twill never be any manner of use here."

" He'll be of use to me, David. I should miss him cruel now."

" God send you don't bring up the childer so, when they come, Madge."

" No childer of yours will ever be spoilt," she said.

" I hope not. And I hope they don't prove of wayward nature ; for that sort's a thorn in the parents' side. Take Dorcas now—so different to the rest of us as you can think. Light-minded and a chatterer—colour and mind both different. I hope as I'll never have a red child, Madge."

" I'm very fond of Dorcas. She's the happiest of you all, anyway—light-minded or not. Only her father sees her good points. I don't think, David, that you rate her high enough."

" I know her very well—light-minded and a laugher," he repeated. " And now there's that insolent chap, Screech, after her ; and he had the cheek to talk to faither and mother about it, and offer to take her—a beggarly man, with none to say a good word for him—a man that have lived on his widowed mother all his days, and haven't even got regular work, but picks up an uneven living where he can."

" What did your father answer ? "

" Sent him away with a flea in his ear ! There was a few high words, and then I seed my gentleman marching off across Ringmoor, and Dorcas with her apron to her eyes. ' Better bide single all your days than marry an out-at-elbows good-for-naught like that,' I told her ; but, of course, she knowed better, and said he was all he should be, and that her life would be gall and wormwood without him."

" Your father's not one to be flouted."

" He is not ; and Dorcas knows it very well. Us shan't hear no more about the chap."

" She'll tell me, however."

" Mind you speak sense to her then, Madge. Don't go pitying her. You're too prone to pity every mortal thing that's in trouble, or thinks it is. You know as well as anyone that Billy Screech is a bad and lazy man. You know that he's not built to make any female a good husband. Therefore tell her so."

" I hope she'll soon find a better to make her forget him."

" I hope she won't then. She've got Sophia's poor luck before her eyes. Better for a woman not to wed at all than wreck her life in it. Dorcas is better at home in my

judgment. Naught but a tramp would fancy such a homely creature as her."

"You're wrong there, David. A girl's face isn't everything. But no brother ever yet knew what his sisters were worth."

"'Tis you who are wrong to say that," answered David. "I know their virtues very well. Sophia was far too good for her husband, and Rhoda—well, never was a better than her—a marvel of a woman."

"She is—yet the men keep off. But her heart's so warm and soft as any woman's, I dare say."

"Men generally want something less fine and high-minded," said David. "Something weaker and wilfuller than Rhoda. They are frightened of her. She makes 'em see how small they are, if you can understand that."

"She does. So strong and fearless. Looks through men and women with those eyes of hers. Yet you wouldn't have her bide a maiden into old age surely, David? There's men good enough—even for Rhoda."

Not a spark of spite marked the speech, and Madge only meant what she said.

"We must find her a husband, David!"

He shook his head doubtfully.

"A kicklish business. She's not the sort to let others do that work for her. She've got no use for a man in my opinion. There's only one male as ever I saw her eye follow for a yard, and that, if you please, be the leat-keeper, Simon Snell."

Madge laughed.

"Poor Mr. Snell! I can't picture him ever daring to lift his eyes to Rhoda."

"No more can't I," agreed David. "And don't you breathe what I've told you to Rhoda, for I may be wrong, and, right or wrong, she'd never forgive even me for saying it. She'll be happy enough here with us, and if a husband comes—come he will. But I don't want him to come in a hurry."

"Such a lover of the night as she is!" declared Margaret. "Never was a stranger girl in some ways, I think—to say it lovingly. Give her a dog or two and nightfall, and off she'll tramp to meet the moonrise. Whatever do she do out in the dark, David?"

"Blest if I can answer that. She've got her secrets—like everything else that goeth in petticoats, no doubt. But few enough secrets from my ear, I reckon. 'Twas always a great desire in her to be out by night, and more'n once faither whipped her, when she was a dinky little maid,

because she would go straying in the warrens when she ought to have been in bed, and fright her mother nigh to death. I've axed her many a time about it, but she can't or won't offer reasons. It pleases her to see the night creatures at their work, I suppose. She'll tell you things that might much surprise you about the ways of the night, and what happens under it."

" She likes the moon better than the sun, I believe. Sometimes I'm tempted to think her blood's cold instead of hot, David."

" You wouldn't say that if you'd seen her kiss my smashed face after the fight last winter ;—no, nor heard her when she spoke of Bartley Crocker kissing hers."

" I believe Bartley would marry her joyfully," said Margaret ; but David doubted it.

" Not him—not after what she said to him in the Pixies' House, and after what I said to him in the bull-ring. No man ever paid dearer for a kiss than him, I reckon. But very good friends now, thank God. But my brother-in-law—no. He'll never come to be that. He don't want Rhoda and Rhoda don't want him."

" He told me that well he knew he'd have beat you, if Rhoda had been o' his side."

" I dare say that's true."

They sat together in the theatre of their future life, and Madge brushed David's hair away from his right ear. The organ was slightly larger than the other and she shook her head discontentedly.

" 'Twill never be just so beautiful as the left one," she said.

He laughed.

" What do it matter so long as I can hear with it ? "

" And your dear eyelid will droop for ever."

" Yes, but the eye behind be all right. Bartley's got his mark too—where I hit him that last time."

" He's coming up one evening to see this place. Not but he knows it well enough already. He told me that the valley under Harter up along and beyond be nearly always good for a snipe at the season of the year."

" A pity he don't come and lend a hand here, if 'twas only mixing mortar. 'Twould be something for him to do. How any living being can waste his life like that man is a mystery and a shame."

" Always happy, too," said Madge. " He've got a very kind heart, David."

" I know that—else he'd have licked me instead of my licking him. Don't think I bear the man any ill-will—far

from it. We're real good friends and he's very clever by nature. I'm only sorry he can't find man's work. He've larned a trade now, then why don't he use it ? "

The conversation shifted to their house presently and Madge declared her longing to see it grow.

" And what be us to call the place ? " she asked.

" I thought of ' Black Tor Cottage,' " he said, " since Black Tor's just above us."

But Madge little liked the name.

" ' Black ' ban't a comely word for a home," she said. " Think again, David."

He shrugged his shoulders.

" 'Tis only the name of the tor," he answered ; " black or white be no more than words."

" Call it ' Meavy Cot,' " she said. " 'Tis an easy name for folks to bring to mind, and I'd sooner my home was called after the river than they great stones up over, though I dare say I'll get very fond of them too."

" So be it," he answered, " ' Meavy Cot ' is the name ; and I hope that a good few prosperous years be waiting for us in it. But if ever I come to be Moorman of this quarter, I might have to leave it."

" You'll do greater things than that some day, David."

" I hope I shall," he answered ; " but to be Moorman is a very good stepping-stone, mark you."

CHAPTER II

BARTLEY DOUBTFUL

A GREAT drake waddled out from the yard of Mrs. Crocker's dwelling, and some white ducks followed him. The male bird was grey, but his head shone with the rich black-green of the fir trees behind him on the hill and the light of these metallic and glittering feathers made a fine setting for his brown eyes. He marched to the stream, put down his bill and tasted the water; he then threw up his bill again, quacked an order to set forth, and so floated away with the current, while his household followed after. Under the little bridge they went and the drake, screwing round his head, cast an upward glance at the parapet as he passed by. There he might have marked a familiar figure, for Bartley Crocker, with his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth, sat and talked to a woman who stood beside him. Their position was public, but the subject of their discourse might have been considered confidential. For the woman the revelation he now made opened a desirable possibility. The man spoke half in jest, yet it seemed clear that he found himself perfectly serious and meant all that he said on the main question.

"Set down your basket, Madge, and listen. I'll carry it along for you presently; but I can't talk and walk together—not when the subject is so large. Where are you going?"

"Over to they old Elfords down at Good-a-Meavy. They be terrible poor, you know, and he's fallen ill and the pair of 'em was pretty near starving last week. One of the Bowden boys—Wellington, I think it was—called there, and he told his father; and of course the matter was looked to. I'm just taking them a thing or two, till the old man can get out again."

"'Tis only putting off the workhouse."

"Maybe—yet a good thing to put it off. They'll be too old to smart soon; and then it won't matter."

"How's Rhoda Bowden?" he asked suddenly.

"Very well, so far as I know."

"I've hardly seen a wink of her since I came back. Yet somehow, Madge, I find her terrible interesting."

"She's a fine character, Bartley."

"Well, when I went up to Barnstaple for three months after the fight, I did two things: I learned a trade, as you know, and I thought a lot off and on of Rhoda Bowden."

"Yes."

"'Tis something to be anything at all. Now, if anybody asks what I am, I can say I am an upholsterer. My uncle was well pleased for me to learn the business, and a very nice girl helped me how to do it. But, somehow, while I looked at her clever hands I thought of Rhoda Bowden."

"You ought to tell Rhoda, then—not me."

"Why should I? It's all ridiculous nonsense, of course; but you see I can't forget the peculiar way we were flung together. If you'd seen her after I kissed her! A princess couldn't have raged worse. Then—at the fight—time and again I tried to catch her eye; but never once she looked at me—always busy with David. Did you hear that she came down two nights after, all by herself, through the snow, to ask my mother how I was faring?"

"No!"

"She did; but nobody ever heard it—not even David, I believe. She told my mother not to mention it; and mother began to give her a piece of her mind; but she didn't wait for that."

"'Tis just like her. Something got hold of her to do it, no doubt, while she was walking through the night. She feels kindly to all sorts of dumb things; but she don't often show any interest in humans—except David, of course."

"If I was a dog now, she and me would be very good friends—eh?"

"Not a doubt of it. Anyway this is terrible interesting to me, Bartley—for more reasons than you'd guess. David and I were telling together only a week agone. I said that when we were married, we must set to and find Rhoda a husband; but David felt a bit doubtful about it."

"Well he may be!"

"You think that too?"

"I'm going to scrape acquaintance with her when you're married. Mind I don't say 'twill go very far. I'm a bit frightened of her yet, and 'twouldn't be very clever to offer marriage to a female that makes you feel frightened. But a man must get a wife some day or other, I suppose, and my mother's at me morning, noon and night, to find one."

"You do tell me wonderful things!"

"But for the Lord's sake keep 'em dark. I can trust you—and only you. You've been a rare brick where I

was concerned all your life, and 'tis very hard we couldn't have been married, as I shall always think whoever takes me. Still, you'll have to go on wishing me well."

"Yes, indeed."

"Say no more about it then. 'Tis only a moonshiney fancy at best, and very like I'd hate the woman if I knew her better—hate her as much as she does me. You know what a fool I am about 'em. I always see her sponging the blood off David's face and always catch myself wishing she'd been doing the same for mine. But I should have felt the same silly wish about any girl, no doubt."

"There's not another girl that ever I heard about would have done it."

"I know—and I ask myself if that's to praise her or to blame her. To hear my mother——"

"Better hear David. She didn't do it for fun, I can tell you. Not to me—not to no woman—did she ever tell what she felt afterwards; but she did tell David; and he says that she didn't know where she was for the first four rounds, and that once or twice after, when it looked like David being beat, that 'twas all she could do by sticking her nails into herself to keep herself from dashing out to help David against you."

Bartley nodded admiringly.

"I believe it," he said. "I saw it in her face."

"And now I must get on," declared Madge. "Can't waste no more time along with you to-day."

"I'll walk up over then and carry your basket," he answered. "When are you going to be married?"

"Not till the house is ready. They've started. There's a lot of the old building will work very suent into our new cottage."

"Yes," he said. "I was over there watching 'em at it yesterday evening. And d'you know what I was wondering?—What I should give you and David for a wedding present."

"No need, I'm sure."

"Every need. You'm like your mother. You'd give your head away if you could; yet when people think to do you a turn, you always cry out against it. 'Twill be a joy to many more people than your humble thoughts will guess, to bring something to help you set up house."

"It 'mazes me, the kindness of the world."

"It might—if the world followed your example. 'Tis your due, and it oughtn't to 'maze you. 'Twould be funny if anybody could be unkind to you."

"'Tis all very hopeful and beautiful, I'm sure—yet

here and there I feel a doubt. Wouldn't name it to none but you; but mother don't seem at all hopeful."

"Don't let her fret you," urged Mr. Crocker. "I beg you won't do that, Madge. There's not a kinder, humbler-hearted woman on the Moor than Mrs. Stanbury; but she's far too superstitious and given to the old stories—you know it."

Margaret looked troubled. These folk belonged to a time when still a few fine spirits from the middle place between man and angel haunted Dartmoor. The pixies were yet whispered of as frequenting this farmer's threshing-floor, or that housewife's dairy; the witch hare leapt from her lonely form; herbs and simples in wise hands acted for potions of might; and the little heath hounds were well known to hunt the Evil One through the darkness of winter nights and along the pathway of the storm. The toad still held a secret in its head; the tarn, in its heart; rivers hungered for their annual banquet of human life; the corpse candle burned in lonely churchyards; charms were whispered over sick children and sick beasts; the evil eye still shone malignant; the murmur of the mine goblins was often heard by the workers underground.

But the time of these mysteries has quite passed by. Back to the opal and ivory dream-palaces of fairyland, back to the shores of old romance, have Dartmoor's legendary spirits vanished; they are as dead as the folk whose ruined homes still glimmer grey on twilit heaths at sunset and at dawn. Knowledge has stricken our traditions hip and thigh; our lore is obsolete; and our Moor children of to-day, as they pass through the stages of learning's dawn, see only an unlikeness to truth that stamps the faces of these far-off things. Yet who shall say that knowledge and wisdom are one? Who shall deny that not seldom the story loved in life's dawnlight and rejected at noon, is welcomed again and only understood when evening shadows fall?

Mrs. Stanbury was saturated with the ancient myths, and they brought her more sorrow than joy.

"I could wish that dear mother didn't believe so many things," admitted Margaret. "But there it is—father haven't changed her in all these years, so it isn't likely that ever he will. She was full of Crazywell Pool only yesterday. You know it—a wisht place, sure enough, and it tells about nothing but death and such-like dismal matters. But if you was to say to her 'twas all nonsense—not that I would go so far as that myself—she'd answer that you was courting your undoing and would surely come to harm."

"I know she would; and you yourself are as bad, pretty near."

"Crazywell is harmless enough every night but Christmas Eve," explained Margaret. "Only then can you say that there's aught out of the common hidden in the water. But then—well, you know what they say."

"Stuff and nonsense! Your mother believes that you hear a voice there after dark on Christmas Eve; and that it calls out the names of them that'll die afore another year's out. What can be sillier than that?"

"Strange things have happened all the same," argued Margaret. "I don't say I trust in all that dear mother does, though she can give chapter and verse for most of it; but Crazywell have spoken out the death year of more men than one. Why, only ten year agone you know how Joseph Westaway, being over-got by the fog, was along there on Christmas Eve and heard an awful voice saying, 'Nathan Snell! Nathan Snell!' And didn't Nathan Snell—Mr. Simon Snell's own father—actually die the March afterwards, of a kick from his horse? You can't deny that, Bartley, because Joseph Westaway heard it with his own ears—him being on the way to eat his Christmas dinner at Kingsett Farm, with the Pierces, and not so much as market merry."

"You're as bad as your mother, Madge, and worse than Bart. You'll believe in the pixies next, I doubt. But there's one thing I do say where Mrs. Stanbury's right, though I can't be supposed to know much about such matters—a bachelor man like me. Your mother told mine how 'twas arranged that Rhoda joins you and David at 'Meavy Cot' after you'm married; and Mrs. Stanbury said that somehow, though far be it from her to set her opinion over other people, she couldn't think 'twas a wise plan; and my mother who never beats about no bush, and always sets up her opinion over everybody, said for her part 'twas flat foolishness, not to say madness, and would end in a rumpus. What d'you think of that?"

"'Tis taken out of my hands, Bartley. I wasn't asked—more was mother. Some might think that it wouldn't suit Rhoda—living along with a young married couple; but I know, and you know, what Rhoda is to David. 'Tisn't a common friendship of brother and sister, but a lot more than that. She'd be lost at the Warren House without him."

"But surely the man doesn't want her now that he's going to take a wife?"

"Yes, he does—to look after his dogs."

"Can't you look after his dogs?"

"No," said Margaret, firmly, "I can't. I don't treat dogs right. I spoil 'em."

"Well, if the three of you are of one mind, I can't see that it's any other body's business. Here's the top of the hill, and I can't go no farther, though I'd like to."

He put down her basket and she thanked him for carrying it.

"And what you say is true, I'm sure! if we three—Rhoda and David and me—be well pleased at the thought of biding together, why shouldn't we do so?"

"Of course. You can but try it. Perhaps she'll marry afore long, and you'll have the dogs on your hands yet afore you expect it."

"I'm sure I hope—at least—good-bye, for the present," said Margaret, and hurried off.

"Ah! she told the truth then!" thought the man; "told the naked truth and caught herself up too late! 'I'm sure I hope she will go,' was what her heart prompted her to say. Maybe 'twill be my luck to cut the knot. Anyhow, as a full-blown upholsterer equal to making two pound a week at any time, I've a right to cast my eye where I please. Funny 'twould be if I should ever kiss Rhoda Bowden again. But 'twill be 'by your leave' next time, I reckon, if ever that happens."

CHAPTER III

PREPARATIONS

TO Margaret Stanbury belonged the mind that suffers sadness at the return of autumn; and even with this autumn, which was to see her marry the man she loved, her usual emotions wakened as the light again faded out of the ling; as the brake-fern once more flashed its first auburn signal from the hills; as the lamp of the autumnal furze went out and left the Moor darkling. Grey rain swept the desert and the fog-banks gathered together in high places. Sheep's Tor's crown and the ragged scarps of Lether Tor were alike hidden for many days. Winter returned with the careless step of a conqueror. Now he delayed for a little, while belated flowers bloomed hastily and ephemeral things, leaping into life, hurried through their brief hours during some golden interval of sunlight and warmth; but the inevitable came nearer as surely as the days grew short and the nights long, as surely as the sun's chariot flamed on a narrower path and the way of the moon ascended into higher heaven.

The wedding-day was fixed; the cottage under Black Tor was finished, and David laboured there to fence the scrap of reclaimed ground and make all sightly and pleasant for his bride when she should come. And now, while yet six weeks of maidenhood remained to her, Madge set off one day to visit Warren House upon various errands. Work was in full swing again at Ditsworthy and David laboured with the rest for his father. The mother of the household viewed this pending great exodus of a daughter and a son with tearful mind, only soothed by thoughts of the increased convenience when David and Rhoda should be gone; but as for the rest, none regarded the incident from a standpoint sentimental.

Now Margaret on her way fell in with Mr. Shillabeer, gun in hand, and she expressed gladness at the sight of him taking his pleasure. For Reuben Shillabeer by force of accident has until the present appeared in a light unusual and exceptional. The prize-fight and all that went before it created an atmosphere wherein the master of "The Corner House" appeared translated from his true self. During that time he responded a little to the joy of life and

went about his business a cheerful and even a sanguine soul; but with the decision of the contest and the departure of Mr. Fogo to his metropolitan activities, Shillabeer found life an anti-climax, the darker for this fleeting spasm of excitement. His wife, as if in reproach, returned upon him with the force of an incubus that haunted not only his pillow but hung heavy on his waking hours; a settled melancholy, the more marked after its recent dissipation, got hold upon him; he exhaled an air of depression even behind his own bar, and only the high qualities and specific vigour of his malt liquors were able to dispel it. The "Dumpling" became increasingly religious and Mr. Merle had long since forgiven his lamentable lapse of the previous winter. Mr. Shillabeer was actually now engaged on behalf of the vicar of the parish, as he explained to Margaret.

"Come Woodcock Sunday, 'tis always my hope and will to get the bird for parson," he said. "He do read the chapter with special purpose to catch my ear; and so sure as it comes, I fetch out my gun and set forth for the man. But what with my failing strength and sight, I can't shoot a cunning creature like a cock many more years. I'm going down under Coombeshead to-day and I shall call on your mother come the evening for a cup of tea and a talk about the revel. Since the wedding feast is put into my hands, I shall do my duty, though I may tell you that a wedding in the air cuts me to the quick. It brings her back as nothing else does."

"I'm sorry for that—truly sorry."

"You can't help it," he said, rubbing the walnut stock of his gun with his sleeve until it shone. "Ban't your fault. But a oner for weddings she was—a regular oner for 'em; and a christening would draw her miles despite the girth of her frame. 'Tis only at the business of a funeral I can comfort myself with an easy and cheerful spirit; for she hated them. No doubt she knowed her own would come untimely."

"Perhaps 'twas an instinct in her against 'em."

"Though never a woman hastened to dry other people's tears quicker than her. Then 'churchings'—she never had no use for them herself, yet she'd often stop for the pleasure of:—'Like as the arrows in the hand of the giant; even so are the young children.' And so on. Naught's sadder than to see a childless wife, in my opinion—specially if she's fond of 'em. I hope you'll have a sackful, my dear."

"It's very kind of you—very kind," said Margaret, frankly. "David and me dearly love the little ones."

"As you should do. I've often thought if that blessed

angel had given me a pledge, that I could have better stood up afore the trials of life. But there's only the Lord for me in this world now. True, Mr. Fogo talks of coming to see me again some day; but I don't suppose he will. What can the likes of me do for the likes of such a man as him? Besides, parson would never forgive me if I had him here again."

He wandered off, and Margaret, who instantly reflected the tone of other minds with the swiftness common to sympathetic and not very intelligent people, went saddened on her way. Some light expired out of the earth and sky for her. She could not use reason and remember that Mr. Shillabeer was—in a word—Mr. Shillabeer. She merely felt that she had met and touched hearts with an unhappy old man. Therefore herself instantly grew a little unhappy and a little older.

Chance objects, as they will at such times, intruded and carried on the dominant mood. A thing beside her path chimed with Madge's emotion and lifted itself as a mournful mark and reminder by the way. Among reddening banks of bracken that spread in a tangle above a little hollow, where scarlet and purple of the bramble fluttered, and sloes took the hue of ripeness, there thrust up an object, livid and gigantic. It resembled some monstrous kindred of the fern that had taken root and risen here. But this bleached frond, so regular and perfect in its graduated symmetry of structure, had once supported an animal, not a vegetable organism. Margaret saw the backbone and ribs of a horse scoured into spotless whiteness by carrion crow, by frost, by rain; and the spectacle added another shade of darkness to her mind. She thought upon it a little while; then there came in sight part of the population of Warren House, and the twins, Samson and Richard, succeeded in lifting their future sister-in-law's spirits nearer to gaiety. The children were sailing boats in a pond, but they abandoned the sport at sight of Margaret, because they had secrets for her.

"You'll promise faithful not to tell, won't 'e?" asked Richard.

"If you don't promise, us won't tell 'e," said Samson.

"'Tis the present us have got against David's wedding-day," said Richard.

"But you must say 'strike me dead if I'll tell,'" added Samson.

"Mother gived us sixpence to buy it with, and Joshua got it last time he was to Tavistock," explained Richard; "but 'tis our present, mind."

"You ought to give us something if we tell you," suggested Samson; but Madge shook her head.

"I shall know soon enough," she answered.

"That you won't, then," replied Samson. "You won't know for six weeks."

"You might try to guess and give us a ha'penny each time you lose," suggested Richard.

"Yes, you might," declared Samson.

They walked beside her and, since nothing was to be made out of the secret, presently told Madge that their gift was a shaving-brush.

"And Napoleon and Wellington have given him a razor," said Richard; "so now he's all right."

"Yes," continued Samson, "and Nap was showing us how a razor cuts hairs in half, and he missed the hair and showed us how a razor cuts thumbs."

"My word—bled like a pig, he did," concluded Richard. "I'm sure I never won't use such a thing when I grow to be hairy. Much too 'feared of 'em."

"You mind when I'm married to David that you often come over and see me, Dicky; and you too, Sam," said Margaret.

"If one comes t'other will come," said Samson.

"Us hunt in couples, faither says—like to foxes," declared Richard. "And we'll often come to tea."

"And oftener still if there's jam—not beastly blackberry jam, mind you, but proper boughten jam from a grocer's."

"I'll remember," promised Madge.

They reached the Warren House after some further bargaining on the part of Samson and promising from Margaret. Then the twins returned to their boats and she entered her lover's home.

David was at work, as the girl knew, but her business lay with Mrs. Bowden, and it happened that Elias himself was also within to welcome her. Both kissed Margaret and both declared their good pleasure at sight of her. She had already become a great happiness to them, and Elias did not hesitate openly to declare that his firstborn was luckier than even he deserved to be.

"'Tis about the Crockers I'm here," said Madge. "Mother, and father too, be wishful for them to be axed; but of course nothing in the world would be done by mother that could hurt your feelings.—Too tender herself for that. So I was to find out if you were for it or against it; and I was to learn if there was any other folk as you'd like specially invited that we mightn't hap to know."

"There's four or five must be there," said Mrs. Bowden. "God knows I don't want 'em; but even at a wedding it ban't all joy, and people often have to be axed for the sake of the unborn, though not for their own sakes by any means."

"I met with the 'Dumpling' up over a bit ago," said Mr. Bowden. "Going shooting he was—might have been going to shoot hisself from the look of him; for a mournfuller man never throwed a shadow. But we had a tell, and I hear as Bartholomew Stanbury means to give a handsome party."

Margaret smiled.

"So he does then. 'Tis wonnerful how father's coming out. Of course the farm's too small and too far off from the neighbours; but Mr. Moses has very kindly given us the loan of his shop nigh the church—the big room."

"'Twill smell of cobbler's wax, but that will be forgotten when Shillabeer takes the covers off," declared Mr. Bowden. "As for him, I could find it in my heart to wish he wasn't going to be there at all, for 'twill remind him of his wife and cast him down till he'll blubber into the plates, but of course he must be on the spot as he provides the dinner. And Charles Moses must be asked, if he's going to lend his big room, though, to be honest, I never liked the man since he made all that fuss about the fight. Pious it may have been, but godly it weren't, for fighting be the backbone of human nature, and you'll find that the Lord's chosen hadn't got far before He set 'em at it hammer and tongs."

"But about the Crockers," said Margaret; "and if I may say so, I hope there's no objection, for David and Bartley be very good friends now, and I'm sure Bartley's terrible sorry he so far forgot hisself as to kiss Rhoda."

"He can come and kiss her again for all I care," replied Elias. "All the nation may be at the wedding and welcome. There's only one living man won't be there if I'm anybody. But Crocker's welcome, and his managing mother, and his Aunt Susan also."

"I don't like Nanny Crocker myself," confessed Mrs. Bowden. "She's a thought too swallowed up in vainglory and seems to think that her family be something special and above common earth. But I had the best of her in argument when my twins was born, and I can afford to be large-minded. As for Susan, there's plenty of sense in her, only she don't dare to show it."

"Bartley's learnt upholstering," said Madge. "He could earn two pound a week in the world now at any time, and he's going to look out for a wife."

"All to the good and all sound sense," replied the warrener. "Well, us had better ask him to tea. Here's plenty here for all markets—our Sophia, with all the larning of a widow and youth still on her side, and our Rhoda—though 'twill have to be a frosty pattern of man to take her fancy, and our Dorcas—not much to look at, but very anxious to get married seemingly."

"'Tis Screech—that bowldacious ragamuffin!" burst out Mrs. Bowden. "To think such a man should dare to offer for any daughter of mine. A poaching, ragged rascal—more like one of they tramps than a respectable man. Faither's going to lay his horsewhip round the fellow's shoulders if he comes up here again—ban't you, faither?"

"Yes," said Elias, "I am. And don't you ask him to the wedding, Margaret, because I wouldn't have it."

Margaret was true to herself.

"Poor chap," she said. "I'm very sorry he can't have Dorcas, but of course you know best. Perhaps he'll mend some day."

"That sort don't mend. But they've a terrible power to mar—like one rotten apple will soon spoil a bushel. And if Dorcas grumbles to you about it, as she will, because you're the sort that hears all the trouble of the world, then you mind and talk sense to her. I'm a reasonable man and I wouldn't say 'no' to a hedge-tacker so long as he's honest; but William Screech don't have no child of mine."

The subject changed and Sarah spoke of all that David's departure meant to her.

"Can't see the place without him for tears," she said. "'Tis weak, but they will flow every time I say to myself 'one day less.' You see, it ban't as if we was all here, then I'd say naught. But Sophia, though she went, was soon back again; and let father say what he pleases about Joshua, Joshua can't stand to work day and night like David, and Dorcas won't look after the dogs like Rhoda. 'Tis a great upheaval, look at it which way you will. If my son Drake had only been spared, of course all things would have fallen out differently."

"Yes," admitted Elias; "and if the moon had only been made of green cheese—us should always have had plenty of maggots for fishing."

Upon this great aphorism Margaret Stanbury took her leave; and Dorcas, who had been waiting for her, now approached in a mood neither lightsome nor joyous.

"I've got the headache," she said. "I've been crying my eyes out for a fortnight and I wish I was dead."

"Dorcas!"

"'Tis all along of Billy Screech—cruel and wicked I call it. But us will be upsides with father and mother yet. Why for shouldn't I marry the man if I love him? Such a clever man as he is—full of ideas and quite as able to make a living, I'm sure, as anybody else. And I want for your mother to ax him to the wedding, Madge—just to pay father out. If he sees Billy there his pleasure will be spoilt—and sarve him right—the cruel old man!"

"Don't feel so savage about it. Bide your time and tell Billy to stand to work and get regular wages and make Mr. Bowden respect him. I've often heard Bart say that Mr. Screech is wonnerful clever in all sorts of queer ways, and 'tis only the poaching makes your father angry, I expect."

"He's given all that up long ago. Will you ax him to your wedding?"

"I can't, Dorcas. Mr. Bowden has just expressly forbidden it. I'm very, very sorry. Perhaps after I'm married I shall be able to help you; but it rests with Billy."

"I'll marry him," said Dorcas. "And not a thousand fathers shall stop it; and I'll tell you another thing: it won't be long afore I do. Just you wait and see."

CHAPTER IV

THE WEDDING

"'TIS the difference in our natures," said David Bowden's mother. "Some folk haven't never ended their work, and some don't never begin theirs. I've known men and women—as thought they were busy people too—who died without ever tasting what I call a day's work."

Sarah walked between Nanny Crocker and Constance Stanbury, and the matrons on her right and left admitted the truth of the remark. They had all come from church; they had seen David and Margaret made man and wife; and it was during a brief review of the immediate past and its arduous duties that Mrs. Bowden uttered her philosophical observation.

"And rabbits going on all the time, mind you," she added. "Come what may, in season, year in, year out, Sundays only excepted, the rabbits goes over all—even a son's wedding. 'Tis the ordering of Nature and we've got to bend under it."

"A very tidy little wedding," said Mrs. Crocker, who had pardoned all parties on hearing that her son was to be best man. David owned no close intimate of his sex, and since he and Bartley were now become excellent friends, he thought upon this idea and his old antagonist agreed to the proposal. For Nanny's son could feel, but not deeply. The past was past, and its disappointments had left no heavier scar on his mind than David's fist upon his face. He could view the prospect of being best man at Margaret's wedding without disturbing emotions, and he accepted the invitation gladly. True he wished once to marry her and would have been proud to do so; but when she chose elsewhere, his desire towards her perished. Other interests had taken its place, and he found himself well able to enjoy the friendship of David and Margaret without any tinge of bitterness even when the past filled his mind. It seldom intruded, for he was of the sort who lack much instinct of retrospection and, childlike, trust all their future happiness on the hope and promise of great to-morrows.

"A very tidy little wedding," repeated Mrs. Crocker,

as though uttering a challenge. The mothers of the bride and bridegroom had waited each for the other to speak upon the first utterance of this graceful compliment; but now Mrs. Stanbury responded.

"Thank you for that kind word, I'm sure," she said. "Coming from you it will be a delight to all the parties to hear it, and I know Madge will be proud when I tell her. We was up altering her dress till the small hours, and it didn't fit to the last. No doubt you noted that ruckle right across the back of her stays, especially when she knelt down. But I hope you won't blame us. We did our best."

"A thing like that is of small account," declared Mrs. Crocker, graciously. "Lord! how they'm ringing the heart out of the bells, to be sure. They never peal like that o' Sundays."

Mr. Moses approached and shook hands with each of the women in turn.

"No," he said; "the fellows be ringing for the best beloved young woman in the countryside to-day; that's why you hear what you do in the bells, my dears. Of a Sunday they'm ringing to worship and the glory of the Lord, all steady and solemn. 'Twouldn't be respectful to the Throne of Grace to peal so free as that."

Then he became personal.

"When I seed you three ladies come through the coffin gate, 'My stars,' I said, 'there's a bit of summer flower garden come back into winter!' 'Twas your bonnets you must know. Such flowers I never did see out of Nature, or in it for that matter. And in church—when the sun comed through Christ washing the Apostles' feet—as it do about midday at this season, and fell on your bonnet, Mrs. Crocker, 'twas as though a dazzling rainbow had broke loose in the holy place."

Mr. Bowden joined them and whispered to his wife. He was clad in Sunday black, but, to mark the great occasion, wore a blue-green tie with an old-fashioned garnet breastpin and chain in it.

"Did you see that scamp, Billy Screech, in church?" he asked.

"No," she answered; "but 'tis a free country: us couldn't forbid him to come there."

Rhoda, the widowed Sophia in a sentimental spirit, and Dorcas followed together. All were clad in new finery and all were quite silent. Mr. Bartley Crocker approached them and took off his hat. He remarked their moods and observed that Rhoda only was cheerful. She looked

superb, he thought, in her purple cloth dress and little hat of squirrel fur.

"Cheer me up," he said. "I've got to propose the bride and bridegroom after the wedding, and I'm horribly frighted to have to do it. I'd almost sooner be fighting again, Miss Rhoda."

"I doubt you'll come well out of it," she said.

"Did I hand David the ring all right?"

"I suppose so. The ring's in its proper place now—that's all that matters."

She was indifferent, but not absolutely cold. She had, he thought, forgiven him, and that made the day pleasant to him. It was the first time since the tragic moment at Pixies' House that she had directly spoken to Mr. Crocker; and the sound of her voice, though not very mellow, yet gave him the greatest satisfaction.

"Did you take the best man's kiss when you was in the vestry?" asked Dorcas.

The interrogation was far from being a happy one; yet Bartley made a masterly answer intended for other ears than those of the questioner. As a matter of fact, he had forgotten the immemorial privilege or most certainly he had exercised it. But now he was glad that he had forgotten.

"No," he answered. "There's a lot of silly old customs better left out, Miss Dorcas. 'Tis not a comely thing for any male to kiss a bride but her father or her husband."

This virtuous sentiment was directed at Rhoda, but she made no sign save a perceptible pursing of her lips.

Then the party, led by bride and bridegroom, passed through rows of the folk and swiftly reached the workshop of Mr. Moses near the bull-ring. It had been cleared for the occasion, and certain busy, kindly spirits had decorated it and concealed its somewhat naked and austere proportions with garlands of holly and laurel and trophies of coloured tissue paper. The place smelt of leather and cobbler's wax; but, as Mr. Bowden had prophesied in the past, these harmless odours vanished when the meal began.

Thirty people sat down to dinner, and Reuben Shillabeer, with his immense back view presented to the company, carved at a side table. To the windows of the chamber small, inquisitive boys and girls succeeded in climbing. They pressed their noses and cheeks flat against the glass, the better to see the glories within; and, thus distorted, their small faces made an unlovely decoration. From time to time Ernest Maunder wiped his mouth, rose from his seat at the table near the entrance, and drove the little

ones away with vague threats familiar in his calling; but they feared him not and all climbed up again when he returned to his plate.

There were present the whole family of the Bowdens, the family of the Stanburys and the family of the Crockers. Mr. Moses occupied a seat beside the bride's mother, and strove, without success, to rouse a spirit of complacence and satisfaction in her; Mr. Timothy Mattacott, as Mr. Maunder's friend, sat by Mr. Maunder; and he showed extreme deference to everybody, because this was the greatest social experience of his life; while as for Simon Snell, who had also been invited, his beard shone with pomatum, and he experienced a real satisfaction in finding himself exactly opposite Rhoda, and in regarding the meal that she made and the two full glasses of beer that she drank with it.

"Will there or won't there be wine?" secretly asked Mrs. Crocker of Mr. Moses.

"From the large way in which everything has been carried out so far, and the loads of food over, I believe Bartholomew Stanbury has run to it," he murmured under his breath.

And he was right.

"Afore we come to the healths, I'll thank you to open they six bottles of brown sherry wine, Reuben," cried out the giver of the feast in a hearty voice, when the apple tarts and cream began to be eaten.

"Only got to say the word," responded Shillabeer. "All's ready."

He was near Margaret as he spoke, and she put up her hand and stopped him.

"And you've got to drink too, mind," she said. "You've done everything as only you could do it. I never did dream of such a wonderful dinner in all my days; and to see all these beautiful wreaths and ribbons on the ceiling! I want to be thanking everybody. 'Tis almost too much kindness."

"Never!" he answered. "If I could put gold and diamonds in the food for you, I would; and them as hung up the adornments never did a bit of work with better appetite."

The wine was opened and poured into thirty glasses.

"There's only one health, or I should say two in one, to be drunk," explained Mr. Stanbury; "and Mr. Crocker, here have kindly consented to do the speechifying."

Mrs. Bowden, rather to her own surprise, grew lachrymose with the dessert. She cheered up, however, when

Bartley rose to propose the health of the bride and bridegroom. To the habitually taciturn folk about him, his flow of speech appeared astounding, and not a few agreed that, though Crocker never did any work, yet his native talents were extraordinary and might have led him to any height of achievement.

"Upon my word," admitted the bridegroom's father, "it can't be denied that the chap—lightminded though he may be here and there—has got amazing gifts. In fact, to be honest, he can turn his hand to anything—larn a trade, fight a great fight and run into mouth-speech as easy and flowing as a parson. He's a wonder—though I say it to your face, ma'am."

He made this handsome criticism to Bartley's mother, and she explained how that Sheepstor as yet knew but a fraction of the truth concerning her son. That the warrener spoke thus, however, largely warmed Nanny Crocker's heart after her second glass of brown sherry; and she told Susan later in the day that there was rather more in Elias Bowden than met the eye.

Bartley received a cheer when he rose and a still louder round when he sat down again.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I beg leave to ask you all to drink long life and happiness to our friends David and Madge Bowden, who this day have joined hands for holy matrimony. I know 'em both and can give them both a very good character, I assure you. As for Madge, she's just a warm, loving heart on two legs—all heart; and if you want to know what she is, don't ask her, but ask the old people, and the terrible poor people, and them that be badly off for food and friends. They'll tell you all about her. But you prosperous people, all sitting around here waiting to have a dash at your sherry—you don't know nothing about her. She's a good angel, that's what Madge Stanbury has been ever since she could run to pick up some baby smaller than herself; and that's what Madge Bowden will be to her dying day. As for David here, last time he and me met in company, he was the best man, I believe. No use for you to shake your head, David. Bested I was; but to-day I'm the best man and he've got to sing second. And I tell him to his face that he's a right down good chap, and every good man be proud to know him. And, for my part, I think such a lot of David that I'd challenge him to fight again this day three months, but that I very well know what Madge would say about it. Besides, there's one or two other people in the world besides David to be thought upon,

and, though I know 'twould cheer Mr. Shillabeer up a lot if we could get Mr. Fogo down again and have another fight, I'm afraid we're all too happy to want to go fighting; and we can't all hope to have David's luck in the ring and out. Well, he had one brave, beautiful woman in his corner when he fought me; and she helped him to beat me without a doubt; but now he has got another brave, beautiful woman in his corner, and she'll help him to win whatever battles he may have to fight. And here's good luck and long life and happiness and content for them and God bless the pair of 'em from this day for ever!"

Everybody rose and David and Madge in their ignorance also rose, but were thrust back into their seats again. Immense applause welcomed Bartley's great oratory, but for his part he kept his eyes on one face, while he drank the health that he had proposed. Rhoda, however, did not return the gaze. She had blushed faintly at the sudden allusion to herself and the cheer from the men that punctuated it; but Bartley's craft and rhetoric quite missed her. The man seemed all of a piece to her: facile, unstable, untrustworthy—and his compliments touched her even less than he imagined. He had prejudiced himself in her eyes for ever, and it remained to be seen whether his own skill and pertinacity would prove strong enough to conquer and destroy that prejudice. It was true, as he had suspected earlier in the day, that her forgiveness was real; but her attitude towards him had been radically changed, or rather radically established, by his outrage. Before the event she had entertained no opinion, good or bad, concerning him. She was henceforth constitutionally unable to regard him as she regarded the bulk of men; and he felt this; but he also felt that he must always interest her; and there is no edifice of emotion that cannot be erected upon permanent foundations of interest.

So he hoped on and when Mr. Charles Moses, to please Mrs. Crocker, and to show the company that others of the hamlet also possessed a pretty gift of words, arose to propose the good health of Bartley himself, he listened in the best possible humour and made a reply that was full of rough and ready fun.

Health drinking became the feature of the wedding feast, despite the fact that it had been intended to eschew it. Everybody found himself or herself toasted, and every man of the company was tempted or chaffed on to his legs in turn. The wine running out, Mr. Shillabeer insisted upon a personal contribution in this sort, and sent a pot-boy for certain claret that had hung fire for some years

and yet, owing to intrinsic poverty of nature, could not be said much to improve with age. Nobody liked it as well as the more generous and mellow brown sherry; but the liquid was wine and free of cost; therefore the folk consumed it, thanked the giver and invited him also to say a few words. Several shook their heads at the prospect and foresaw that the ample spectre of Mrs. Shillabeer must instantly rise to cast a chill upon the spirit of the hour; but it was Mr. Bowden himself who urged the host to speak, and Reuben straddled his legs, heaved a mighty sigh, crossed his arms and addressed the company.

"Why for you want me to say anything, Elias Bowden, I'm sure I don't know; but I must do my share with the rest, I suppose, and I'm sure I hope, as we all hope, that this here wedding will be the beginning of a happy united life for bride and bridegroom. We, as have been in the state and had the fortune to draw a prize, like Mr. and Mrs. Bowden here, and Mr. and Mrs. Stanbury, and Mrs. Crocker, though she's lost her prop and stay these many years, and me—we know what marriage is. But them as draw a blank, 'tis hidden from them, and the bachelor men and spinster women sprinkled about—they don't know neither. But perhaps nobody in this company—widows or them as is still happily joined together—ever felt to marriage what I felt to it. Time and again I said to my dead partner that 'twas too good to last, and she'd laugh at me and say I was the sort that always met trouble half way. And I seed her fading out week after week; and I seed the wonnerful bulk of her dwindling; and yet I couldn't realize what was coming till it did come. The last words she said to me—or rather she whispered 'em, for she was got far beyond speech—the last words was, 'Don't you take on too much, Reuben. We shall meet again in the Better Land.' And I'm sure I hope it may be so, though I'm an unworthy creature. And I hope you won't think that I say these things to cast down any joyful member amongst us. Far from it. I only want for these young people to remember that the more they love, the worst must they suffer if things fall out contrariwise. But whether David goes, or Margaret here be plucked off untimely, 'twill be the joy and gladness of the one that's left to remember what it was to have a well-loved partner. And, so whatever haps, they'll never regret this day's work. And I hope everybody have eaten and drunken to their liking."

Then the bride insisted that Reuben should himself have some dinner.

"If 'twas anybody else proposed it, I should certainly refuse," he said; "but since you want for me to do it, and my inwards are hollow as a drum, I'm quite agreeable to pick a bone and drink a quart."

Bartholomew Stanbury now spoke. He thanked everybody for coming, praised the dinner and the wine, declared it to be the second most joyful day in his life, and explained that the first had been when he himself was married. He confirmed Mr. Shillabeer's view of matrimony, staggered the publican by advising him to look round and find a second; and concluded by proposing the health of Mr. Charles Moses, who was among the oldest and best thought upon residents of Sheepstor, and who to-day had specially distinguished himself by lending his famous shop for the wedding breakfast. "Free of charge he done it, mind you," explained Mr. Stanbury, "just out of the goodness of his heart he turns all his tools and leather and what not out of this here place, and lets me have it for the feast; and I wish to publicly thank the man afore you, neighbours, and let everybody know the sort he is."

In reply, Mr. Moses, who usually became reminiscent after successful feeding, traced briefly the history of Sheepstor in so far as his own family helped to make that history. In addition to being a staunch Church of England man, Mr. Moses unconsciously subscribed to a still more venerable creed. He worshipped his ancestors, and now detailed the great and picturesque part played by his great-grandfather, his grandfather and his father in the development and elevation of the village.

"Once," said he, "we were merely a little bit of a hamlet at Dartymoor edge, and scarce a man farther off than Tavistock knew aught about us. But my forbears and others like 'em rose up in our midst and toiled and laboured for the good of the town, and each did his appointed part, until—well—all I say is, look at us now! Sheepstor stands as high as any other place of note that ever I heard about in the kingdom, and we be carrying on the good work in the good old way."

With the recollections of Mr. Moses, which were much protracted, light began to wane, and certain prominent members of the party prepared to wend homewards, while yet their wild roads might be seen. All rose, and there began great hand-shaking and well-wishing, together with some laughter and some shedding of tears. Reuben broached a bottle of whisky for the men and tea was brought in for the women. All the young people had long since departed, because the entertainment from their

standpoint ended with the eating. Now nearly a score of pipes began to glow, and the wedding guests set out on many roads. The adult Bowdens departed homewards, and Elias carried his wife on his arm and strove to cheer her. Her son, Drake, had unhappily intruded himself largely upon these final emotional moments, and she refused to be comforted. With a quintessential distillation of pessimism worthy of Mrs. Stanbury's self, Sarah declared that somehow during Mr. Shillabeer's speech it had been borne in upon her that Margaret's firstborn would prove a failure.

"Stuff and nonsense—silly woman! 'Tis your digestion," said the master of the Warren House. "I very well knowed how 'twould be when I seed you taking that sour purple muck they call claret atop of the good old-fashioned sherry. No stomach could be expected to endure one on top of t'other, and you're fairly paid out for it."

Mrs. Stanbury was very silent on the way home, but Bart and his father did the talking. Both assured Constance that the entertainment might be considered absolutely and brilliantly successful from first to last. She, however, expressed a multiplicity of doubts.

"The loin of pork was done to rags, and the stuffing tasted of naught," she said. "'Tis things like that are remembered months after all that went right be quite forgotten. And I hope to God they've got the cottage walls dry, and that leak over the ope-way made good. When I was up there a fortnight agone to see the wall-papers, you'd never have said mortals could live in the place inside two weeks."

"Madge vowed 'twas all right when I drove her over with her boxes a bit ago," declared Bart. "The house will be very vitty after they've lived in it a week or two."

Of course, the first to leave Sheepstor were the bride and bridegroom. In a trap hired from "The Corner House" David carried Margaret off to her home. Their possessions were already stored at "Meavy Cot." Fires had been burning for a week and everything was made ready for the married pair.

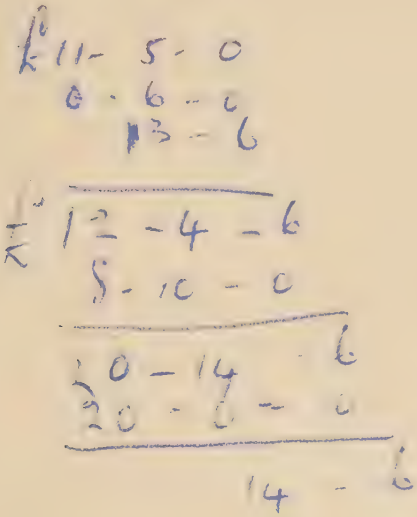
David's last words were addressed to Rhoda.

"Mind," he said, "a fortnight from to-day us shall be ready; and I'll come up to Ditsworthy in my new cart for you and your box. But we all shall meet afore then, no doubt."

He drove his wife away under a wild evening sky, amid blessings and cheers and cries of "God-speed." Some of the voices were shrill and tearful, some merry, some deep

and gruff. The trap trundled along; Madge flashed a white handkerchief; then she and her husband were swallowed up by the roaming, red light that misted under the sunset.

"A happy omen, souls," said Mrs. Stanbury. "For the sun have been shining ever since it rose. A cloudless marriage day is all to the good, I believe; and though the sky may offer for rain afore midnight, naught of the day can be marred now."



CHAPTER V

ARRIVAL OF RHODA

A FORTNIGHT after her marriage there came a day when Madge roamed restlessly and rather nervously about her little house. She was very happy, yet with a clouded happiness, because this ideal bliss of dwelling with David alone drew to its close. Real life had yet to begin at "Meavy Cot," and real life included Rhoda Bowden. On this day David started early to fetch his sister. Among his other possessions was a horse and a light cart; and with these he set out in the chill half light of six o'clock on a November morning for the Warren House.

Now Margaret's preparations were complete. A dish of cakes kept hot upon the hearth; and aloft in Rhoda's room the severe simplicity of the rosy-washed walls, low roof and little iron bedstead seemed to echo Rhoda's maiden mind. But her sister-in-law was not content with the unadorned chamber. She had nailed an illuminated text or two upon the walls; she had hung there also an old grocer's almanac with a picture of a deerhound's head upon it, because she thought this portrait of a dog would please Rhoda; and she had made a little bouquet of wild berries and set it with a sprig of ivy in a vase on the chest of drawers. A few of Rhoda's own possessions had already arrived. On the floor of the room lay no carpet; but the white deal boarding was broken by some skins—black, brindled and tawny. These memorials were all that remained of certain defunct dogs who had owned Rhoda as mistress during their bustling and eventful lives. She was wont to preserve the pelt of any special favourite; and her nature received a placid satisfaction in possession and use of these remains. The rough coats that had oftentimes received caress or chastisement as occasion demanded, now felt only her naked feet at morn and evening.

Margaret began to fear for the tea, but David was a punctual man, and at five minutes past the appointed time a light flashed in the outer darkness, a cart creaked and jolted over the rough way, a dog barked and Rhoda's deep

tones answered it. She was soon beside Margaret, and they shook hands and kissed affectionately.

"Come and see your room," said Madge, "while David puts up the horse and cart. I'm afraid you was jolted a bit at the finish. The new road round the hill be terrible rough travelling for wheels."

Rhoda was not cheerful and had little to say. She produced some parcels and one from Mrs. Bowden; but it seemed that some trouble sat upon her. She brightened up, however, on reaching her room and much admired it.

"Like your kind heart to think of all these things," she said.

"You'll see the sun of a fine morning rise 'twixt Hessary and Cramber," explained Margaret. "And I'm afraid the noise of the waterfall may keep you waking a bit till you'm used to it. 'Tis quiet to-night, but after heavy rain Meavy comes down like thunder."

"Naught keeps me awake," declared Rhoda. She altered the position of the fragments on the floor. "That was the best collie ever I had," she said, drawing a black and orange skin to her bedside; "a terrible fine dog, and only in his prime when he died. Father said he was going mad, though I never thought it. However, he was queer and snapped at the childer in a way very unlike himself, and father would not risk it, but put a charge of shot into his head when I was out of the way. You'd hardly believe it, Madge, but I cried! On my honour I cried—and a girl of near eighteen at the time."

Rhoda had brought a few of her special treasures, and Margaret now helped her to arrange them to advantage. Her library was trifling and included a Bible and prayer-book, an anthology of verses, which Madge saw for the first time and felt astonishment at seeing, and a work on canine diseases.

"You can have they rhymes if you've got any use for them," said Rhoda. "They was given me by my gossip, old Martha Moon, when I was confirmed, but I don't understand poetry, though you may."

Then Rhoda admired the dog almanac, and she was still doing so when David's voice below brought the women down together.

He was thirsty and wanted his tea.

Rhoda produced one of the famous Bowden cakes, famed alike for size and wealth of ingredients; but the meal, while lacking nothing of goodness, warmth and variety, awoke no answering glow in the master's mind. He was clearly troubled, and Rhoda's passing brightness

also gave place to a taciturn demeanour before her brother's concern. Margaret thereupon rated David and he explained his annoyance.

"Whatever has come over you?" she asked. "So glumpy and glowry as you are! What's amiss with him, Rhoda? But I'll wager I know. It all looked so cosy and homelike at the Warren House that David felt homesick and didn't want to come back to me!"

David was bound to laugh at this absurd theory.

"Homesick!" he said. "I'm only homesick when I'm out of the sight of our brave chimney; and well you know it."

"'Tis Dorcas," explained Rhoda. "She's giving mother and father a lot of trouble for the minute. She'll see sense come presently, we'll hope."

"Billy Screech?"

Rhoda nodded.

"She'll come round; but for some cause us common folk can't fathom, she's in love with the man. So she says, anyhow, though 'tis hard to believe it."

"As to that," declared Margaret, "Billy ban't particular ugly. He've got a long, sharp nose, I grant you——"

"Yes," interrupted David, "and he've been told to keep that nose away from the Warren House; and the mischief is he won't obey father's commands. Two nights agone the moon was full, and Rhoda went out for to breathe the air and see if there was a fox down by the fowl-house. And a fox there was—long nose and all, and his name was Billy Screech."

He looked at his sister and she continued the narrative.

"I hate spying," she said, "and God, He knows I didn't go afield to seek that man, or any other man. And I thought Dorcas was to bed, for she'd gone off after supper with a faceache. But travelling quick and silent, as my way is, over the close turf of the warrens, I came round a rock right on top of 'em. And——" Rhoda grew hot at the unpleasant recollection and broke off.

"And he was sitting on a stone, and she was sitting on his lap," said David, who spared his sister the details. "Little red-headed fool! I wish I'd found 'em, for I'd have thrashed the man to jelly afore her eyes, and cured her that way."

"What did you do, Rhoda?" asked Margaret.

"I made her come in. As her elder sister I had the right. She wasn't in the least ashamed of herself seemingly. I boxed her ears, when the man had gone, and she forgot herself and tried to bite my hand."

"She's like a rat in a trap over this business," said David. "Never would you have guessed or dreamed 'twas in her to show her teeth so."

"All laughter and silly jokes till this miserable man came after her," continued his sister. "And now—I blush for her. 'Tis very horrid and shameful to think that any girl can demean herself so."

David here left the room and Madge continued to Rhoda.

"She feels 'tis her great chance for a home of her own, I expect. Us all gets that hope sometimes, so why not Dorcas?"

But the other did not sympathize with this theory.

"Us don't all feel it," she declared. "A many women never do. And if all of us was to marry, the work of the world would stand still. There's a great deal for free women to do that nobody else can do so well as them; and it seems to me that the first thing a female does, after she's brought childer into the world, be to look about and try to find an unmarried woman to help her do her work. There's scores of spinsters spending their lives messing about with their sisters' babbies."

"Babbies ban't everything, I grant that," said Margaret; but she said it doubtfully. In her heart children certainly took the first place. Indeed, Madge felt a little guilty of being untrue to herself in the last sentiment. Therefore she modified it.

"All the same, they mean a lot to most women, and I long for 'em cruel and ban't ashamed to say it."

"The likes of you would; and so do David; and when they come, you'll want for me to look after some young things beside puppies," said Rhoda. She smiled, but did not laugh. There was a saying at Warren House that none had ever heard her laugh.

"As to that," answered her sister-in-law, boldly, "you talk like an old maid a'ready, and you but a few and twenty. We'll soon larn you different! When you see what 'tis to have a li'l home of your very own, and a man of your very own, I'm sure you'll begin to find that marriage is good. Now come and look at my parlour and tell me if there's not something there that you'd wish away."

She lighted a candle and exhibited the glory of her best room to Rhoda's gaze.

"'Tis everything it should be, and you've arranged it beautiful, I'm sure," declared Rhoda; "and the presents do look better far than they did afore. This here, that me and Sophia bought for you"—she indicated a little looking-glass in an ornate gold frame—"why, it's ever so much

finer than ever I thought it in the shop at Tavistock where we bought it ; and father's sideboard do look splendid."

"You must see the pictures by daylight," said Madge. "They be proper painted pictures that David picked up in a sale. He got the four for seven shillings, and the auctioneer said the frames were worth the money."

Rhoda admired very heartily and again congratulated Margaret on her skill and taste.

"What should I wish away ?" she asked. "I can't see nothing that isn't just where it should be, I'm sure."

"Look round again."

But the other, after a further scrutiny, only shook her head.

"Why, those two handkerchiefs in the glass frames hanging each side of your lovely looking-glass. There's poor Bartley's purple and yellow and David's blue and white spots. Now surely, surely, Rhoda, it ban't a seemly thing to hang 'em up there to remind everybody of that horrid fight ? And besides, as 'tis only of a Sunday the parlour's likely to be used, that makes it worse, for who wants to think of such a business on the seventh day, of all days ?"

Rhoda was looking at the colours, but showed only interest.

"They come out very nice," she said, "and of course they ought to be here. If I was you, I should be prouder of them two things and the great, valiant battle they stand for, than anything else belonging to David. And if you'd been there, Madge, as I was, and had seen David, despite all that he went through, come out top and smash in t'other man's face with his last strength afore he went blind—if you'd seen it, you wouldn't wish the colours away. 'Twas I hitched 'em off the post when everybody else had forgot 'em."

"There's the other man to think of, however."

"Why ?" asked Rhoda. "I'm sure that Bartley Crocker, who be pretty large-minded with all his faults, wouldn't think none the worse of David for hanging up the handkerchers like this. He'd have done the same quick enough—or his mother would have done it for him. The men be good friends, and so they ought to be. But that's no reason against it."

Margaret admitted the justice of the argument.

"If you think it can't hurt anybody's feelings, no doubt there's no real harm," she said.

"Of course not. Men be men, and not so tender and touchy as the likes of you. Why, what did Mr. Crocker say

at your wedding? Nothing but what was friendly and kindly, I'm sure."

"No, indeed—a beautiful speech; and 'twas as much for that reason as any other that I thought perhaps, if ever he came to see us and caught sight of the colours——"

"He'll be the first to say they look very fine," prophesied Rhoda. "All the same, I hope I shan't be here when he calls—if he does call—for——"

She stopped and Margaret answered.

"Don't say that. I'm sure, after what he spoke about you in his speech, you ought to let bygones be bygones and feel friendly."

"That's all past and forgiven," said Rhoda; "but I won't pretend I feel to him like I do to other men."

"I hope you don't," replied Madge, laughing. "That's just what I want to hear, Rhoda."

The younger was puzzled and her sister-in-law, unconscious of the fateful moment, made the first move in a game that was to determine three destinies.

"I hope you won't. I hope you feel that Bartley Crocker be worth a little more thought than most men. At any rate, don't set your mind against him. That wouldn't be fair—to yourself, Rhoda."

"My mind's neither for nor against any human creature outside my own people. Why should it be?"

"There's no reason at all. You're young and you're terrible pretty, and not a soul that's ever set eyes upon you feels anything but kind thoughts of you."

Rhoda did not answer for a few moments; then a bewildered expression faded from her face.

"I'll go out and see the kennel now."

"Leave that till the morning and unpack your things. 'Twill be dark as a wolf's mouth over there."

"I've brought my own lantern," said Rhoda; "I'll go over now, if you'll show me the way."

The horn lantern was lighted and Madge led Rhoda where her husband had planted a row of flat stepping-stones across the river. The kennel and a byre stood there together, and four dogs whined a welcome to their new mistress. In the light of the flame their shining noses and lustrous eyes flashed out of the gloom, and they leapt about the women. David appeared; then Madge went in to wash up and prepare supper, while Rhoda stayed beside her brother.

"'Tis good to be back-along with you," she said, "and I do think, all ways, it must be better. Joshua be coming out wonderful and surprising father every day since you

went; and Sophia will take my place; and Nap and Wellington, between them, will look after Joshua's work with the traps. 'Tis all right, but for Dorcas. There's nobody left to keep her in order now I'm gone—hateful little toad! I axed father to set parson on her; but he wouldn't. Something will have to be done, but I don't know what."

"I'll see father later," replied David. "Dorcas be the first Bowden that's a fool, and we must treat her according."

They all supped together presently, and David planned the nature of the life before his sister. The course of laborious days did not spare her and left little margin for idleness; but Rhoda neither knew nor wished to know the meaning of leisure. She appeared well content with David's plans and nodded from time to time, but said little.

CHAPTER VI

REPULSE

AT noon in early May, when the willow's golden flowers ran up the still naked stems like fire; when the clouds in the sky were large and fleecy and the birds sang again from dawn till even, Bartley, walking beside the leat, where it wound like a silver ribbon between Lowery Tor and Lowery Farm, met Rhoda Bowden. Neither expected to see the other in that spot. She explained that she had been far afield with a message for her brother; he admitted that he walked there with no special object but to kill an hour.

"How's your mother?" she asked.

"No better. I'm only here now till I know the doctor's been. As soon as I see his gig drive up the hill, I shall go down across the river home. She vows 'tis nothing; but I think she's worse than we know."

"Summer may get up her nature again."

"I'm sure I hope so too. And 'tis more than kind of you to cheer me up."

He walked beside her.

"May I give your dogs a sandwich?" he asked. "My aunt cut me a bit of bread and meat to fetch along with me; but I don't want it."

She nodded and Bartley divided his food between a fox-terrier and a collie. In a twinkling his luncheon vanished.

They kept silence for a long time, and she, astonished that he could be mute, addressed him.

"David be going to show sheep at Tavistock this year."

"Good luck to them then," he answered, wakening from his reverie. "Those horned creatures he has got look very fine and carry an amazing deal of wool—anybody can see that. I'm very much inclined to try a few myself. Must ask him all about them if he'll be so kind as to tell me."

"No doubt he would. He's doing a bit of Moorman's work now in the quarter, and looking after a good few things besides his own."

"The Moorman, old Jonathan Dawe, is past his work, I doubt?"

"Far past it. But he and David understand each other, and David does very well out of it. He'll be Moorman for certain come Mr. Dawe dies, unless something better turns up."

"Why doesn't the old chap retire?"

"David have often axed him the same question. He says the race of Dawe never retires. He means to die in harness—unless Duchy won't lease the quarter to him no more."

Bartley nodded and silence again fell. He had seen not a little of Rhoda during the past few months, and he knew now that he longed to marry her and none else. Madge had promised to use her wits in the good cause, and she did her best for him, but Crocker perceived that his wooing must take place upon no very conventional lines. Rhoda Bowden was not to be taken by storm but by strategy. So, at least, he believed, and he had devoted much time to the problem of her capture and displayed a patience and pertinacity alike very remarkable in him. He paid no regular and obvious court, for fear of being warned off by David before he had given Rhoda a fair opportunity to change her mind concerning him. He merely considered her when the chance offered; spoke well and enthusiastically about her behind her back, and seized every incident and event that could serve to bring her into his company, or take him into hers. Margaret helped, but not as she would have liked to help. Bartley held himself cleverer than she in this matter and expressly forbade her either to ask him at present to "Meavy Cot" or take any other step which must result in a meeting between him and Rhoda. She did just what she was told, watched his cautious progress and felt absolutely certain that he was mistaken. Her way had been quite different from his, and, as she came to know Rhoda better, she felt that Bartley's elaborate plans would miscarry and leave her sister-in-law absolutely indifferent.

"You can try your plan and I'll look on," she said to him; "and, after you've proved you're all wrong, then you will have to try mine. Mind, I don't say my wits will be much more use than your own; but they may be."

And now the time was ripe, in Crocker's opinion, to put his experiment to the proof and see whether his unostentatious but steady siege had in reality shaken the fortress at any point. He felt tolerably certain that Rhoda would refuse him; but he intended to ask the great question. He was, indeed, prepared to put it many times before taking "no" for an answer.

At a stile their ways parted. She would follow the leat, which leapt Meavy at an aqueduct not a quarter of a mile from her home; and he would plunge into the valley, cross the river and return to Sheepstor.

"Well, good morning to you," she said. "I hope that Mrs. Crocker will mend afore long."

"Wait," he answered. "I won't keep you, Rhoda, but 'tis a pretty place and hour for speech. May I ask you something?"

"I'm a thought late for dinner as it is. But ask and welcome."

"'Welcome'! I wonder? 'Twould be a very welcome thing to think I was welcome. But I'm not vain enough to think it. I only hope it."

His personality and the masculine look and voice of him troubled her. A man who was obviously alive to sex and alert before women made her uncomfortable. The deep-eyed sly man—the man who was servile to women, who rushed to set chairs for them, who bowed to them and strove to catch their eye in public—these men she hated. Bartley was such a man, but he had long since perceived her dislike of gallantry and had given her no second cause to resent his attentions in that sort. His sustained reserve and apparent indifference had satisfied her and modified her former detestation; but it had not advanced him one span in her regard. She did not answer him now, and he continued:

"You see, Rhoda, very queer things happen—things that are deeper than we can explain or understand. And, before I speak, I want to go back a bit, because what I'm going to say may seem pleasanter in your ears if I remind you of a thing that happened long since. When I kissed you in the Pixies' House you were terrible angered with me, and 'twas as natural for you to be so as 'twas for me to kiss you."

"I don't want to hear no more of that, and I won't," she said fiercely.

"You must," he answered. "You've no choice. You're a just woman—as just and honourable as all who be called Bowden, and you must hear. I insist on it, for 'tis almost life or death to me. When I kissed you and you tore from me like a frightened bird, what did you say? You forget, but I remember, and I'll remind you. You pressed your face against my cheek by accident, and I couldn't stand it, and I kissed you and you said: 'You loathsome, godless wretch! I could tear the skin off my face. I'd sooner the lightning had struck me.' Then you fought

your way out and trampled on my hand with your boot till the blood ran. Now, Rhoda, listen. I'm not loathsome, and I'm not godless. You touched me accidentally and I took a terrible fierce fire from it. Why? Not because I'm a free liver; not because I would do the like from any maiden's touch. Not from that—I swear it; but because that touch meant a great deal more to me than I understood. I did a thing any man may do under certain circumstances, Rhoda; but the circumstances were hid from me then, though they came out clear enough after. I loved you in the Pixies' House, though I didn't know it then; but my nature was quicker than my mind, and my nature took charge and made me do the thing I did. Not out of insult, but out of honour I did it; and I've honoured you more and more ever since that day. I honoured you when you helped David; and I knew then, as well as I know that God made me, that if you'd been in my corner instead of his I'd have beat him. I honoured you at his wedding—so graceful and lovely and above the rest as you were; and I honour you now, and I've been a better chap since I knew you. And—and if you'll marry me, Rhoda, I'll try with all my strength to be worthy of such a wife. Oh, Rhoda, don't say 'no.'"

She only understood a part, and the tone of his voice spoke and soothed her to patience, though his words left her cold. She perceived that he was deeply in love with her and had hidden it carefully from her. That he had hidden it was a grace in him: she thanked him for that. His excuse for the past did not impress her. All that remained was to refuse him and leave him as swiftly as possible. She did not feel very flattered or elated. She did not like him any better for this avowal. The master-sense in her mind was one of frank discomfort. She felt not particularly sorry that she had to disappoint him; she experienced only a desire for haste—to speak and end this unsought scene and get out of his sight. She wasted no words.

"'Tis kind, no doubt, to offer marriage," she said, "but you're wrong. Us wouldn't suit each other. You'll find a girl to please you better than me. Ban't no use talking about it. I don't feel—I don't feel drawed, Mr. Crocker, and I suppose unless both parties be drawed 'tis no use hoping for a happy marriage."

"Think of it—take a bit of time. 'Tis mere moonshine the likes of you going single, Rhoda."

"I've seen marriage under my eyes ever since I could mark anything," she answered. "I've seen it and still see it."

She stopped and shook her head, implying that as yet the state offered no large charm for her.

"Good-bye. Think no more of this—and more will I."

She left him, and he sat down where a sluice opened off the leat, so that the overflow in time of torrent might do no hurt to the banks. He sat and regretted what he believed to be his precipitation. The time was not ripe. He had sprung this proposal too suddenly upon her. For her own sake he had not played the lover as a preliminary, and as a result she failed to recognize the lover in him. He had erred in tactics. He was not much downcast, but felt that the opening battle was well ended, with a defeat that he foresaw. He had explained the kiss, and this interview was thereby justified. It would not be necessary to retrace that old ground again. And yet he doubted whether Rhoda had quite understood him.

"If she did understand, she didn't believe," he told himself.

He was not ill-pleased with the encounter. He had fired the first shot and engaged her in the first skirmish. He must tell Margaret all that had happened, and he must hear from Margaret if any results of this adventure were displayed by Rhoda. He felt pretty certain that none would be. David she might confide in, but not in Margaret. The interview as a whole did not dismay him, and it was not until he reached home and heard an unfavourable report of his mother's health that he became gloomy.

Meanwhile the girl, a little fluttered by this occurrence, proceeded on her way with thoughts not wholly pleasant; and to her came the leat man, Simon Snell, upon his rounds. His eyes grew large and watered a little when he caught sight of her in the distance. At first, indeed, he was minded to dive off the footpath, hasten away and make as though he had not seen her; but he fortified himself against this pusillanimous instinct, held on boldly, and presently saluted her in his thin, somewhat senseless voice.

"Good day to 'e, Miss Rhoda Bowden. Glad to meet you on the leat path, I'm sure. Don't often see you this way."

"Good morning, Mr. Snell."

"And a very good morning to you. Beautiful spring weather to be sure. Beautiful dogs to be sure. Never see you or David without a fine dog. And the dog as I had off your faither would have made a very fine, upstanding dog without a doubt, if her hadn't have gone and died. Not your fault—I'm not saying that."

"I was very sorry to hear it."

"Of course you was; and if I'd had enough sense, and put the poor young dog in a basket and carry 'un up over to you, I'll lay with your dog cleverness as you'd have saved 'un. But, instead, I traapsed off to Walkhampton with him—to Adam Thorpe—and he got the dog underground in a week."

"Thorpe don't know much about dogs."

"You're right there; I quite agree. Would 'e like to see me open a sluice-gate? 'Tis purty to see the water go down all of a tumble, and often a rainbow throwed off when the wind be blowing slantwise across the sun."

"Can't stop, but I'll see the thing done some other time, if you please."

"An' welcome; and I'm sorry, I'm sure, to have kept 'e with my talk, and you wild to be on your way, no doubt."

"If you want a puppy, you can have one next month," said Rhoda. "That yellow collie there, with a bit of Gordon setter in him, be the faither. They're very nice-looking creatures."

"And so I will then, and gladly and thankfully," he said.

Simon walked by her and she felt easy and comfortable. His neutral, not to say neuter, personality met and matched her own. His round, innocent eyes, smooth face and silly beard put her at ease. He did not thrust masculinity upon her, but was merely a fellow-creature talking upon subjects that interested her. What Crocker had of late tried to be in his attitude towards this woman, Mr. Snell really was. The one attempted a posture other than his own, and failed in it; for no woman could look into his eyes and not know something about him. The other equally remained himself, yet even so he satisfied Rhoda, although she came to him unusually exacting, from her recent interview with Mr. Crocker. Simon's thoughts, Simon's humble humour, and Simon's general attitude to life, if vague, were quite acceptable to Rhoda. To her his voice did not sound thin or his opinions childish. She was comfortable in his company, and she left him presently with a pleasant nod and a "good-bye" that was almost genial.

He stood a long time, scratched his beard when she had gone out of sight, and felt that thus to walk and talk beside a maiden was rather an achievement for him. He admired Rhoda very much, but he thought of her with chronic rather than acute admiration.

She had certainly been amazingly gracious and kind to him. Could it be possible that she liked him? The idea brought moisture upon his forehead, and he sat down

and mopped it. He began to fear that he had been too bold in thus proceeding for more than a hundred yards beside her. Perhaps she had indicated annoyance and he had failed to observe it. Then he assured himself that he was a man, like other men, and had a perfect right to talk to a woman. He decided that he must think about Rhoda quietly for the next month or two. He asked himself if he should take her a dish of the fat leat trout that he caught sometimes ; but he felt doubtful whether such a step would not be going too far.

" I might catch 'em, and clean 'em, and start with 'em," he reflected ; " and then, if it comes over me on the way that I'm being a bit too dashing, I can just sneak home again, and none the wiser."

CHAPTER VII

EYLESBARROW

MARGARET BOWDEN not seldom visited the haunts of her youth, for many favourite places lay within a walk of her home, and she had a measure of loneliness in her life which might be filled according to her fancy. Sometimes she blamed herself that life should offer intervals for amusement or for rest. David found no such leisure from dawn until after dark; Rhoda was always busy out of doors, and even when she had nothing left to do, as happened in the evening, would often sequester herself afield under the night. But Margaret's holiday generally followed the midday meal; and after noon she often went to see her mother, or sought some holt in Dennycoombe Wood, or beside Crazywell, or among the heathery hillocks of Eylesbarrow. That great eminence upon the forest boundary was familiar and pleasant to her. She knew it well, from its tonsure of stone, piled above a grave, to its steeps and slopes and water-springs. A pool with rushes round about spread under the highest elevation and mirrored the sky; while southerly the ling grew very large, and there were deep scars and embouchures torn by torrents from the sides of the hill.

Hither came Margaret to keep tryst with Bartley Crocker on a day in June. She had not seen him save for a moment since his interview with Rhoda, but meeting a week before at Sheepstor, he made a plan and she promised to join him on Eylesbarrow and hear what he had to tell her. The east wind roared over Madge where she sat snug in a little pit; but the sun was warm and found her there. From time to time she rose and lifted her head to see if Bartley was coming. Then she sat down again and fell back upon her own thoughts. She began to apprehend the mixed nature of marriage and those very various ingredients that complete the dish. As yet only one cloud hung over her united life with David. But time might reasonably be trusted to lift it. They were a happy pair, and if his stronger will lacked ready and swift sympathy on all occasions, it still served the fine purpose of controlling her sentimentality. He hurt her sometimes, but she kept the pain to herself. His sledge-hammer methods were new to

her; while he could not understand her outlook, and, indeed, he made no attempt to do so. But she never argued; she always gave way and she loved him so dearly that it was easy to give way. Rhoda, too, she liked better as she knew her better. She felt sorry for Rhoda and longed to round off her life into a more complete and perfect thing. It appeared an outrage on Nature that such a girl should remain unmarried. She strove to enlarge Rhoda's sexual sympathies and make her more tolerant of men. But she did not succeed. And so it gradually happened that the future of Rhoda rather obsessed the young wife's mind. She was determined to see Bartley and Rhoda man and wife if she could bring it about. She was here upon that business now. That he had spoken to Rhoda she did not yet know; but she suspected it.

Again Margaret looked round about her, while the wind flapped her sun-bonnet till it stung her cheeks. At hand morning and night alternately swung up over the uttermost eastern desolation that even Dartmoor offers. By Cater's Beam and the sources of Plym and Avon, the solemn, soaking undulations ranged; and they were shunned by every living thing; but to the north a mighty company of tors thrust up about the central waste; and westerly stretched the regions of her home. Far beneath lay Dennycoombe under Coombeshead, and Sheep's Tor, like a saurian, extended with a huge flat head and a serrated backbone of granite. She saw her father's fields on the hillside and knew them by their names. In their fret of varied colour under the stone-crowned hill, they looked like a patchwork coverlet dragged up to some old, gnarled chin. Men were working there and elsewhere on the land; and in the stone quarries, far off on Lether Tor, men also worked. She gazed upon the familiar places; the homesteads and the solitary homes. She busied her mind with the life histories advancing beneath these roof-trees; and here she smiled when she marked a dwelling where joy harboured for a little; here she sighed at sight of one where joy had ceased to visit; here she wondered at thought of houses where the folk hid their hearts from the world and stared heavy-eyed and dumb upon their kind. But she had an art to win secrets, and few denied her knowledge or declined her sympathy.

One house chained her attention and awoke in Madge personal thoughts again. She looked at a small cottage near Lowery, far distant on the opposite side of the river. It stood under a few trees and crouched meanly a hundred yards from the highway. The roof was of turf, mended

with a piece of corrugated iron kept in its place by heavy stones; the broken windows were stuffed with clouts. A few fowls pecked about the threshold, and adjoining the dwelling stood a cow-byre under the same roof with it. The front gate was rotted away and rusty pieces of an old iron bedstead had taken its place. These details were hidden from the distant watcher, but she knew them well, and in her mind's eye could see a flat-breasted, long-nosed, hungry-faced woman, with grey hair falling down her back and dirt grimed into her cheeks and hands. It was Eliza Screech, widow of a man who had blown himself to pieces with blasting powder in the adjacent quarry, and mother of William Screech, the mistrusted admirer of Madge's sister-in-law, Dorcas. This young fellow had lately brewed a sort of familiar trouble; and while she thought upon it, David's wife considered her own situation and wished that a thing presently to happen to Dorcas might happen to her instead, and so turn sorrow into rejoicing. This was the cloud on her horizon. Her mother, indeed, shared her pessimism, but everybody else laughed at Margaret's concern and declared it to be ridiculous in one scarcely six months a wife.

She debated on the ways of Nature and the ironies of chance; then Bartley's voice was lifted, and she popped up again, and he saw her and approached.

"Didn't you hear me sooner?" he asked, flinging himself down near her.

"No, indeed. I was thinking so much about one thing and another, that I never heard you. Hope you've not been seeking for me a long time?"

He did not answer but struck at once into the subject that had brought him.

"Well," he said, "I've started on her. I've begun and told her a few things to clear the way and get her into a better frame of mind. Pity I hadn't stopped there and left what I said to soak in a bit; but I had to go on and give the reason for saying it."

"You told her then?"

"I did, and she took it fairly quiet. Of course she said 'twas out of the question and never, never could be. I expected that. But I'm not going to believe it, Madge. The thing is how to go on with it. I want you to tell me what to do next. You promised you would. Mustn't worry her, and at the same time mustn't let her forget I'm at her elbow—dogged and determined and fixed in my mind. I want you to be clever for me, as well you know how, and tell me what line will please her best. I shall

leave talking for a bit, and then I shall offer again. My only fear is that she'll see somebody else in the meantime, and that while I'm planning and holding off and doing naught to fluster or anger her, some other pattern of fool will blunder in and shock her into saying 'yes' before she knows what she's done. You can often surprise a woman into relenting who never would relent if you went on grinding away in a cold-blooded fashion. They're obstinate themselves, but they don't admire obstinacy in us. Would you have a dash at her and keep on, or would you hold off and busy yourself in other quarters? Which would bring her to the scratch quickest? You know her; you can give me a few good hints, surely."

"Do neither of these things, Bartley. She hates anything like courting, or speech about marriage. And she hates surprises of any sort. She's an old woman in the way she likes things to jog steady. If aught falls out unexpected, it flurries her. And that's the hard thing you've got afore you, if you are going on with it. Because you're all for dash and quickness and surprises, and she's all against everything of the sort."

"I must keep grinding on in a cold-blooded style, then?"

"Ess fay, and the more cold-blooded, the better like to please her."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Be damned if I think I've got patience for it, Madge. I love her well enough but I can't bide like a lizard or a spider watching a fly. I lost you along of taking it too easy—yes, I did, for I swear you'd have married me if I'd offered myself a year before David came along. And now, perhaps, I'll end by losing Rhoda. There's nobody else in the field and she's got no excuse for not taking me; and that's just what will make her hard to catch. But I'm determined in reason to have her. Only I'm not built to wait till we're both grey-headed."

"Let me begin to help," she said. "You bade me do naught so far, and I've done naught. Not by a word or wish have I let her guess I thought about you or about her. She don't know that I'm interested yet. And I won't let her know; but I can set to work witty and say the word in season and help the good cause on. Why not? I want to see her married just as much as I want to see you married. 'Twould mend you both—yes, you so well as her."

"That wise you've grown since you took David! Though, for that matter, you was always wise enough for any two girls."

"Not a bit wise—wish I was; far from that, worse

luck ; but sensible how things are and sensible how difficult 'tis to get two natures to fit in sometimes. I be sure as possible that you and she would make a happy couple and that you'll never regret it if she takes you, and more will she ; but the difficulty is to see where your natures be built to fit together. 'Tis like a child's puzzle : to fit you and her close."

"There's not much we've got in common except love of roaming by night."

"A pretty useful taste in common for lovers, I should think. But I'll find more out than that. I know a lot more about her now than once I did ; and I'll tell you this : I'm not so much in secret fear of her as once I was. Yes —fearful I felt at first—so off-handed and stern and aloof she was. But now I've come to see she's terrible simple really, and not very different from other girls—except here and there. She's interested in all that falls out, and she's hopeful to-day and cast down to-morrow like anybody else. She sits of a night thinking—yes, she thinks. Lord knows what about, but 'tis a sign of a heart in her that she can pucker up her forehead thinking. Kind, mind you, too. Not partickler kind to me, or interested in me away from David—I must grant that. But kind to living things in general."

"But I don't want her to be kind—to anybody but me. I want her to be grand and odd and unlike t'others. 'Tis her oddness as much as her loveliness took my fancy ; but if her oddness ends in her being an old maid, that'll mean a good deal of my time wasted."

"Don't think it. A rare good wife's hid in Rhoda, and, please God, you'll be the man to find it out. I'll set to work, Bartley. Don't fear I'll be clumsy. Too fond of you both for that. We'll meet again in a month, if you can wait so long——"

"Which I certainly can not."

"In a fortnight then. Thursday's always David's morning for Tavistock ; so this day fortnight we'll meet again, unless anything falls out to prevent it. And I won't be idle. But I mustn't frighten her ; and she's easily frighted when men are concerned. Fellows drop in of a night often to speak to David ; but nine times out of ten, if she's to home, she'll pick up her work and pop up to her chamber, or take her hat and away out of the house by the back door."

"Never was such another, I believe. All the same, I'm a hopeful fashion of man. I'll win her yet with your help."

"I do trust so, Bartley."

Silence fell between them, only broken by the hiss of the wind above their heads.

"I must get back-along now," she said at length. "How goes on Mrs. Crocker? Better, I hope?"

He shook his head but did not reply.

"I shall come to see her again next week, if I may."

"Do, and welcome, Madge. Strange how illness breaks down the pride and shows the naked truth of a man or woman. She's frightened to think of dying—her that you might have said was frightened of nothing."

"And still frightened of nothing really. 'Tisn't this world that frights her, nor yet the next—only the link snapping between. There's a lot like that."

He changed the subject again and followed her eyes that had roamed across the valley once more.

"You're looking at Screech's house," he said. "I hope this thing they tell about isn't true?"

"I hope not, Bartley, but I think it is."

"And if it is? However, it don't become a giddy bachelor to make light of it. Only you'll hear such a devil of a lot on the other side, that perhaps before long you'll be thankful to find one here and there who can keep his nerve about it."

"Yes, I shall hear enough about it—and to spare; you're right there."

He laughed.

"I'm not one of those that can see no good in Billy Screech," he said. "Too like him myself, I reckon. All the same, I know if the right woman came along to make it worth while, I could stand to work—for her—as well as any man. You'll see some day. I can't be bothered to work for myself, Madge, but if ever I get hold of Rhoda, 'twill surprise you to find what a knack for earning money I shall show. And same with yonder hairy chap. He's clever and cunning. He'll make a very good partner, if the woman ban't too hard to please, and don't worry him with silly questions."

They parted a few minutes later; but before he went Bartley Crocker shook Madge's hand very heartily as he thanked her with great earnestness for her promises.

"What you'll do for me I can't guess," he said; "yet well I know that what you can do you will."

"Couldn't name it in words myself," she answered. "But all the same, I feel as one woman might have a bit of power over another in such a matter. I put my hope in her common sense. She don't lack for that, and, once

you win her, her common sense will be a tower of strength for the both of you."

"That's good to know, I'm sure; for common sense never was my strong point and never will be," he confessed.

"And if I've promised more than I can perform, you must forgive me," she said. "I must guard myself against your disappointment, Bartley, for it may come to that."

"You'll do what you can," he answered, "for liking of me; and you'll do the best you can; and if I lose, 'twill be no blame to you; and if I win, 'twill be such a feather in your cap as few of the cleverest women can boast."

CHAPTER VIII

TRIUMPH OF BILLY SCREECH

ON a day in early summer David Bowden met his father by appointment at Nosworthy Bridge in Meavy valley. It was not Sunday, but both wore their Sunday clothes. The fact would have led observers to suppose that a funeral or a wedding must be at hand, but it was not so. They had before them a serious and, they feared, a difficult duty. Neither knew that the other proposed to wear black; yet a sort of similar instinct led to the donning of the colour, and each felt glad, when he saw the other, that he had been of that mind.

"'Twill be for you to speak, father," said David; "and where I can think of words to back you up, I shall put them in. If you and me together ban't stronger than such a man as Screech, 'tis pity."

"The law be weak, unfortunately," answered Elias, "else I'd never have gone near the man, but just left justice to take its course. But as it stands, so lawyer tells me, we can't make Screech marry Dorcas if he won't. The thing is to be as patient with the man as we know how, and coax him into it if possible."

David nodded.

"It's a bad business, looked at which way you will. Rhoda's took it more to heart than all of us. She won't never speak to Dorcas or see her again."

"We mustn't talk that nonsense. Nature will out, and for my part, to you, David, though to none else, I'm sorry to God now I said 'nay.' However, we'll see if we can fetch him to reason. Here's the house—a ragged, hang-dog look it hath."

"And there's the man," added David.

Billy Screech was digging in a patch of garden beside his cottage, but at sight of the visitors, he stuck his spade into the earth, cleaned his boots on it, drew down his shirt-sleeves, donned his coat and came forward.

"You'm a thought earlier than I expected," he said. "Give you a very good morning, Mr. Bowden; and you, David."

Elias took the hairy Screech's hand; David nodded, but avoided a direct salute.

"In your black, I see—a black business, no doubt," said Billy. "And if you'll give me a matter of minutes, I'll polish up a bit and put on mine. Perhaps you didn't know as I've got some good broadcloth for my back; but I have."

He called to his mother and went upstairs. Then, while he was absent, the thin and slatternly woman known as Eliza Screech shuffled in and put chairs for the Bowdens. She stood and rubbed her hands over each other and listened to the noise her son made overhead. By certain sounds she knew how his change of attire advanced.

"I hope you are on our side in this matter, ma'am," began Elias, solemnly.

"Yes, I am, and always have been since I heard about it," she said. "I've been at him night and day till he threatened to take the wood-chopper to me. I can't say what he thinks about it, for not a word will he utter. He's always chuckling to hisself, however. 'Tis a very shameless thing to have happened, though very common. I'm sorry about it."

She spoke kindly but indifferently.

"My girl is the same as him," declared Mr. Bowden. "'Shameless' is the only word to be used against her—a hardened giglet as keeps her own secrets and did keep 'em till they would out. And, instead of going in tears and sackcloth, she's as gay as a lark and don't care a button for our long faces. Even to church she'll come, if you can believe it. And not a word of sorrow."

Mrs. Screech heard her son putting on his boots.

"Well, I hope that your way of saying things will catch hold on William," she answered. "He's a thoughtless man; but he was never fond of the girls till he met your Dorcas, and 'twas a very great blow to him he couldn't take her."

"He must take her: that's what we've come about," declared David.

Mrs. Screech shrugged her shoulders.

"There's room here," she said, "and though us be a little down in the world, I dare say for a pound or two we could mend up the glass and make things vitty for Dorcas. I'm very fond of her, I may tell you. Here's William coming down, so I'll go."

She left them, and a moment later Mr. Screech entered transformed. He wore excellent black. He had brushed his hair and beard; he had washed his hands and put on a pair of tidy boots.

"Now," he said, "perhaps you'll let me know what I

can do for you, Mr. Bowden. Not long since there was a thing as you might have done for me; but I got a very sour answer, if I remember right. However, you'll find me more reasonable if you come in reason."

"In reason and in right I come, William Screech. And well you know why for I'm here," said the master of Ditsworthy. "You've seduced my daughter Dorcas, and you cannot deny it."

"Yes, I can," answered Mr. Screech. "I can deny it and I can take my Bible oath of it. I never seduced her, and I never even offered to. I'll swear she never told you that I seduced her."

"She'll tell me naught."

"Then why d'you charge it against me?"

"Don't fiddle with words," broke in David. "The question be simple, and the answer be 'yes' or 'no.' Do you deny that you are the father of the child she'm going to bear?"

"Certainly not. I am the parent; and a very proud man I shall be on the day."

"Then why d'you say you didn't seduce her?" cried David.

Mr. Screech looked at him in a pitying and highly superior manner.

"Better let your father talk," he said. "You childless men be rather narrow in your opinions. He's more sensible and more patient. Because a maiden changes her state and starts out to bud, it don't follow nobody's seduced her. If anybody was seduced, 'tis me, standing here afore you."

He grinned genially at the humour of the situation. David uttered an inarticulate sound of anger; Mr. Bowden settled himself in his chair.

"Explain yourself, William," he said.

"Well, I will. Perhaps you may remember when you forbade the match, that your daughter was a bit savage about it."

"She was. I allowed for that."

"You didn't allow enough. You didn't know what a clever girl Dorcas was; and you didn't know how well she understood me. None ever understood me like her. I was merely a sort of a mongrel man—good for naught—in your opinion. You didn't know how witty I could be if I chose; or what a lot of brains there was in my head. But she knowed and she trusted me. Pluck! Talk about this here prize-fighter's pluck and your Rhoda's pluck—Good Lord! there's more valour in Dorcas than the whole

pack of you! She's a marvel, she is. This be her work, master, not mine. After her big sister catched her with me and boxed her ears, she soon knowed what to do. And she done it; and I was very pleased to help. And here we are."

Mr. Bowden gasped.

"Do you mean to say a daughter of mine axed you to get her in the family way?" he asked.

"That's the English of it," answered Mr. Screech. "There was nothing else she could do. 'Anything to oblige you, Dorcas,' I said, and my bosom swelled with rejoicing to think the maiden I loved best in the world could trust me like that. ''Twill larn my father and that self-righteous David and Rhoda to mind their own business in future,' says Dorcas to me; and I'm sure I hope it will. You must all try to be sensibler without a doubt."

David felt an inclination to crush and smite the hairy and insolent Screech; but nothing could be gained by such an act.

"And how do we stand now, please?" inquired Mr. Bowden, very humbly.

"In a very awkward fix, of course," answered Billy. "Here's my dear Dorcas going to have a babby, and me wrapped up in her, and my mother cruel fond of her, and her own people all shocked out of their skins at her; and yet I ban't allowed to make an honest woman of her; because you've sworn afore witnesses that you'd sooner see her dead than Mrs. William Screech. It do seem a pity; but of course we all know the man you are—never known to call back an opinion. Dorcas and me be halves of a flail—one naught without t'other; but you've spoken. I shall be very pleased to help with the child, however; and I hope you'll bring it up well to the Warren House."

This was too much for David.

"If you give us any more of your cheek, I'll smash you where you sit," he said.

Billy shrugged his shoulders.

"Where's the cheek? What a silly man you are! Ax your father if I've said a syllable more than the truth. I'm only sorry about it. Of course the likes of me, with my skilled inventions and general cleverness, ban't worthy to be your brother-in-law—you with your great ideas and your five hundred pounds—left to you by somebody else. But, maybe, your father may feel different. A father can understand a father. 'Tis for him to speak now, not you, and say what he thinks had better be done about his child—and mine."

"There's only one thing to be done, and that afore the month is out," said Mr. Bowden. "And you know what, for all your sly jokes, Billy. The pair of you have bested me. Well, I know when I'm beat. And the sooner the wedding be held, the better for everybody's credit."

Billy pretended immense surprise.

"You mean as you'll call home all them high words, master?"

"Every one of 'em," answered Elias, calmly. "If I'd been a bit sharper, I might have guessed as you and her would find a way. You have found it—'tis vain to deny that. So there's nothing to do but wed; and I hope you'll live to make good your promises; and so soon as you do, I'll be the first to up and own I misjudged you."

"That's fair and sportsmanlike, master, and I'll be as good as you; and if my new rabbit trap don't make you proud of me for a son-in-law, Elias Bowden, you ban't the honest man I think."

"It's settled then," said David, rising, and eager to be away.

"On one condition," answered the other; "that me and Dorcas have a proper show wedding, same as David here had. Us won't have no hole-and-corner sort of job; and there's no reason why we should. Only us and you know about it."

"She shall have a perfectly right and proper wedding, Billy," declared Mr. Bowden.

"Very good," answered the other; "and the day after we'm married and my Dorcas comes here to live, I'll show you the trap, and save you twenty pounds a year if a penny."

Mr. Screech rose and indicated that the interview was ended.

"The banns go up on Sunday," he said. "Have no fear of me. I'm in quite so much of a hurry as anybody."

Mrs. Screech, who had heard everything from behind the door, crept off, and the Bowdens departed, while Billy went as far as the gate with them.

"Please give Dorcas my respects, and tell her I'll be up over to tea on Sunday, if agreeable to all parties," he said.

"I will, William," answered Elias, mildly; "and 'twill be quite agreeable, I assure you."

The victory was complete, and time proved Mr. Screech a just and even magnanimous conqueror. But for the moment the friction set up by his methods of approaching matrimony caused not a few persons a little uneasiness. While David had writhed before Billy's satirical humour,

Rhoda Bowden also suffered ; but she took herself off and thus escaped direct contact with the cause of it. It happened that Dorcas was restless after her father had set forth to see Mr. Screech. She had wandered towards Coombeshead and finally—moved as many others were moved—determined to seek Madge, and so win comfort, and wait with her at " Meavy Cot " until David returned. Of the issue Dorcas felt no manner of doubt. Mr. Screech longed to marry her, and his single-hearted devotion was the finest element in a rather mean character. Marriage, Dorcas felt to be a certainty ; but she was none the less eager to learn how the great interview had fallen out and to what extent Billy had punished his future brother-in-law. Mr. Screech especially despised the Puritanical views of David ; and Dorcas suspected that he might have taken pleasure on this occasion in wounding rather deeply her brother's susceptibilities. She went to see Margaret, therefore, and felt sorry to find Rhoda also at home. Her sister was in the garden ; but Rhoda saw the visitor some way off and departed leisurely without any interchange of words. The red girl flushed and set her teeth in a sneer ; the other passed quickly into the Moor.

Then Dorcas entered and found Madge making a pudding. She sat down, took off her sun-bonnet and nibbled a piece of raw rhubarb.

" Did you see Rhoda go off ? " she asked.

" Never mind, 'twill come right. You know how she feels things."

" Feel ! Don't you think she feels, Madge. She's hard as them stone statues of women in church—a dead-alive, frozen beast ! Feel ! I wish somebody would make her feel. Don't you look like that. You've lived with her now half a year and more. You know what she is."

" Be fair, Dorcas. She takes this a bit to heart ; but that's only what all of us do."

" You don't, and you needn't pretend it.—Not like her, anyway. You'd have done the same if your father had said you wasn't to have David. You'd have trusted David, same as I trusted Billy. Things like her—Rhoda, I mean —why, good Lord ! they're *not* women ; they ban't built to bring dear li'l, cuddling, cooing babbies into the world, like you and me. All for yowling dogs and walking in the moonlight—*by herself !* Pretty frosty sport that for a female creature with blood in her veins !"

" It's throwed her into a great trouble, and 'tis no good to deny it," said Margaret. " Of course the man will marry you, as you've told me in secret, and no doubt David

will come back presently in a good temper about it; but Rhoda's different. She's rather terrible if a girl slips. I've heard her say frightful things long before this—this business of yours. 'Tis the point of view, Dorcas. You'm so good as a married woman now, and me and you can talk; but Rhoda's awful different—as the maidens often be till they'm tokened. Then they begin to soften and understand men-folk a bit better."

"Fool!" said Dorcas.

"She'll take a bit of time to recover; but she'll be at your wedding with the best of us, if I know her."

"Not her! Mark me! She'll never come inside my house or put a finger to my childer. And God knows I don't want her to."

"She will—she will. You're too hard. She'll grow wiser and more understanding. She's a very kindly, sensible girl in a lot of ways. Only she's made of sterner stuff than me and you. I wish I was so noble-minded as her and so brave, I'm sure. She's as plucky as David, Dorcas. Naught on four legs can frighten her."

"Four legs!" said Dorcas. "I want for a man on two legs to frighten her—ay, and master her and make her run about and do his will. But no man will ever look at her. They want something to put their arms around—not the sour, stand-offish likes of she. 'Tis no better than facing the east wind to be along with her."

"Not at all, Dorcas. You'll soon see different. She have a sort of queer feeling in her that 'tis an awful horrid thing to give yourself over to a man. I do believe she feels almost the same if a woman marries. You'd think the whole race of women had received a blow in the face when one takes a husband. She can't talk of 'em with patience. But us will get her a husband come presently. Then her eyes will open."

"Never—never!" foretold the other. "She'll go single to her grave—and a good riddance when it happens."

"Here's David coming up the path," said Margaret, and both women went out to meet him.

But Madge's prophecy was only partly fulfilled. He brought, indeed, the news that Mr. Screech was prepared to wed with Dorcas at the earliest opportunity; but he showed no joy at the fact, and was indeed in an exceedingly bad temper.

"What are you doing here?" he said to Dorcas, sternly. But she never had been and never was likely to be brow-beaten by a man.

"Come to see Madge, seemingly, and hearing that you

was gone with father to have a tell with my William, I thought I'd wait and see what came of it."

"Your William!" he said. "I wonder you don't blush for yourself, Dorcas Bowden."

"Ah! you must see a lot of things that make you wonder," she answered insolently. "Not for myself did I ever blush; but for father, as forbid me to marry the only chap that ever loved me, or was ever likely to. What do I care? I suppose you and father, in your righteous wisdom, have decided that we may be married now, anyway; and if you haven't 'tis no odds, because parson will mighty soon shout out the banns when we ax him to do it."

"You're a bad woman," said her brother, shortly, "and this is a very brazen, shameless piece of work."

"That for you," she answered, flicking her fingers in his face. "I'm as straight and honest and true as your wife, or Rhoda either. 'Tis her that's nasty and shameful, with her prudish ways, not me. And if I've done anything to think twice about, 'tis father's fault—and yours."

David was angry and turned to his wife.

"The less you hear of this sort of talk the better," he said. "I'll have no trollop here, fouling your ears with her lewd speeches."

"Call yourself a man!" sneered Dorcas. "Call yourself a man, to speak of me like that. You know I loved the chap as faithful and true as a bird its mate, and I was his wife just as much as Madge be yours in everything but the jargon and the ring. And you turn round and call me 'lewd,' because I did the only thing I could do to force father to say 'yes.' 'Tis you that are lewd—you and yonder creature, who won't see me nor touch me no more; and so much the better for me." She pointed to Rhoda, who was sitting a little way off calmly waiting for Dorcas to depart.

"Larn from your wife to be larger-minded," she began again; then David silenced her.

"Stop!" he thundered out. "Who are the likes of you—a common, fallen woman—to preach to me? You get going out of this! I don't want you here no more, and I won't have you here no more."

"Bah!" she answered. "You're jealous of my William—that's what you are! Because you can't do what he's done!"

"Be gone before I come back," he answered, "or I'll wring your neck, you foul-thinking slut! And look to it you treat her as I do, Margaret, or there may come trouble between us."

He glanced at his wife darkly, then, in most unusual anger, left the threshold and walked across to Rhoda.

"A pair of 'em," commented Dorcas. "And, please Heaven, they'll both be childless to their dying day. I hate the ground they walk on!"

"Don't! don't, for God's sake, curse like that," cried the other, and Dorcas, divining what she had done, was instantly contrite. Indeed, she began to cry.

"I'm—I'm that savage; but not with you, Madge—never with you. Forgive me for saying that. Of course you'll have plenty of children—plenty—more'n you want, for that matter. Never think you won't—such a lover of the little creatures as you be. You'll make up for lost time when you do start. And I hope you'll love mine as well as your own, for, barring me and Billy and Billy's mother, there won't be many to love 'em."

Her words had turned Margaret's thoughts upon herself and made her sad.

"Sometimes there comes an awful fear over me, Dorcas, that I shall have none," she confessed. "'Tis all folly and weakness, yet you'd be astonished how oft I dream I'm to have none. And if it fell out so, I doubt David would break his heart."

"Don't think such nonsense. Dreams never come true, and 'twill be all right," declared Dorcas. "But now I'll clear out, else he'll bully you for talking to me so long after what he threatened. And, David or no David, you've got to be our friend, Madge; because there never was such a dear, sweet creature afore, and never will be. And if 'tis a girl, Billy have promised me I may call it 'Madge'; and I shall do."

Dorcas dried her eyes and prepared to depart, but the other bade her wait a moment.

"A drop of milk you must have; and—and—I know 'twill be a dinky darling, and I shall love it only less than you and your husband will," Margaret said.

Then Dorcas drank and set off homeward, fearing further trouble; but with her father she had no painful scene, for by the time that Elias returned to the warren, the humorous side of that day's encounter had struck him. He kept this to himself most firmly however; but, as a result, he indulged in no anger. Instead he merely informed Dorcas that Mr. Screech would marry her at the earliest possible moment on one condition: the bridegroom insisted upon a wedding of ceremony and importance.

CHAPTER IX

COMMON SENSE AND BEER

CERTAIN persons of local note had gathered together for evening drinking in the bar of "The Corner House."

Charles Moses, Bartley Crocker, Mattacott and Ernest Maunder were there; but interest chiefly centred in one just entered upon the state of matrimony. The truth concerning his marriage was known to none present but Mr. Crocker, and he kept the secret.

Mr. Moses chaffed Billy Screech, and Billy, whose wit was nimbler than the shoemaker's, answered jest for jest.

"As for cleverness, we well know you're clever," declared Mr. Moses. "You've got a clever face, Screech—a clever nose, if I may say so—'tis sharp as one of my awls."

"My nose has a point, I allow," said Mr. Screech, "and your awl's got a point; but I'm damned if there's much point to the things you say, Moses. All the cleverness in your family was used up afore you come into it, I reckon."

"I knowed the cleverest man that ever was seen in Sheepstor," said Timothy Mattacott, slowly. "So does Maunder here. So clever he was that he tried to walk faster than his own shadow, and he sowed a barrow-load o' bricks once, thinking as they'd grow up into a house."

"And what became of him?" asked Crocker.

"They put him away," said Mattacott. "He was afore the times. He's up along with the Exeter pauper lunatics to this hour, I believe."

"Samuel Edge was cleverer than that," declared Bartley. "And I'll tell you why: he weren't content with anything as it stood, but must be altering and changing and pulling down and building up."

"A foreigner from Bristol way," said Mr. Moses.

"Yes, and the great cleverness of the man undid him. There was an egg-bottomed well to his house, you remember, 'Dumpling'?"

"I do remember," admitted Mr. Shillabeer. "One of they egg-bottomed wells the man had."

"And though it ran out more than enough water for all his needs, nothing would do but he must cut his egg-bottomed well into a bell-bottomed well. A pushing, clever chap."

Reuben took up the narrative.

"He went down hisself to do the work; and the sides fell in when he'd under-cut a bit; and they didn't get the carpse out for three days," he said gloomily.

"Yet an amazing clever man was Edge," concluded Bartley.

"Better he'd left well alone, however," ventured Mr. Screech. His jest was greeted with a stare and an uncertain sort of laugh. The folk treat a pun like a conjuring trick; they are dimly conscious that something unusual has happened in conversation, but they cannot say what, and they have no idea how it was done.

"If Edge was the cleverest man, which, for my part, I won't allow," proceeded Moses, "then who was the cleverest woman, I wonder?"

"My wife," declared Mr. Shillabeer, instantly. "You must be just to the dead, Charles, for they can't defend their characters. But I say that my wife was both the largest and best and cleverest woman that ever comed here; and if anybody doubts it, let 'em give chapter and verse."

"Nobody does doubt it, 'Dumpling,'" said Bartley, in a soothing voice. "There may be a smart female here and there yet, and there may be a clever maiden or two coming on also; but never did any such grand creature as Mrs. Shillabeer appear among us. Mr. Fogo used to tell about her, and how you won her from a regular army of other men."

"True as gospel. There was a good few fighters after her besides me—heavy weights too. She'd never have looked twice at anything less than a fourteen stone man. In fact, to see any male short of thirteen to fourteen stone beside her was a thing to laugh at. 'Twas when I was in training for my fight with the old Tipton—years younger than me he was all the same, that I won her. I was at a little crib out Uxbridge way, and her father had me in hand, and she come out from Saturday to Monday, and us went walking over fields. Then a bull runned at us, and my girl weren't built for running, but I got her over a stile somehow by the skin of the teeth, and the bull helped me after her from the rear. Horched me in the buttock, and I bled like a pig after. In fact, I saved her life. And she knowed it; and when I offered myself 'twas 'Dumpling' first and the rest nowhere, like the race-horse."

Mr. Maunder spoke.

"A faithful man to her memory. No doubt if the widow-men could all look back on such partners, there'd be less marrying a second than we see around us."

"In my case," declared the host, "I can't forget her enough to think of a second. Her great largeness of character was the peculiar trick of her; and she took such delight in everyday things, owing to being town bred, that when I look at a sow with young, or a pony and foal, or the reds in the sky at evening, or a fall of snow, they all put me in mind of her. For whether 'twas a budding tree, or a fish in a pool, or one of they bumbling bees in a bit of clover, everything made that woman happier. Never wanted to go back to London, took to the country like a duck to water. So I can't forget her so long as the lambs bleat and the clouds gather for rain and the bud breaks on the bough. I say, 'Ah! how my wife would have liked to see that fox slip off that stone;' or 'how my dear woman would have clapped her hands to look at this grey-bird's nest with the eggs in it."

The old man heaved a sigh; the rest nodded.

"Mr. Fogo was different," declared Simon Snell, who had recently arrived. "He'd got terrible tired of Sheepstor afore he left it; for he told me so."

Reuben admitted this, and his gloom increased.

"He'll never come no more, I'm afraid. 'Twas only the mill that kept him so long. He must have London booming round him. He's been in hospital since he was here, for the doctors to cut a lump of flesh out of his neck. But he's very well again now; and busy about a coming turn up between Tom King and an unknown."

"How do it feel to be among the race of married men, Billy?" asked Simon Snell.

"'Tis a very proper feeling, Simon," answered the other. "In fact, I'll go so far as to say a man don't know he's born until he's married. You chaps—Bartley here and suchlike—talk of freedom. But 'tis all stuff and nonsense. You ban't free till you'm married; you be a poor, unfinished thing without your own woman, and I should advise dashing blids like you, Simon, and you, Timothy, to look around before the grey hairs begins to thrust in. Thirty to thirty-five is the accepted time. I'm thirty-three myself."

"There's outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual grace I see, too," said Mr. Moses. "I was by your house a bit ago, and I was terrible pleased to mark all the windows mended and a bit of paint on the woodwork of 'em, and a new swing gate where you used to have naught but a pole across and a piece of old sacking to keep the chickens in. The place is a changed place and so smart as any bride could wish for."

"'Tis all that and more," declared Mr. Screech. "And if you'd gone in—and you'll always be welcome, Moses—you'd have found my wife fresh as paint herself in her new print, and, what's still more wonderful, my mother with her hair all twisted tidy and her clothes neat as ninepence. I would have it, you must know. 'Us must pull ourselves together,' I said to mother. 'Dorcas comes from a terrible tidy family,—too tidy, you might say, and I'm not pretending I mind the fowls in the kitchen myself, or the dogs on the beds; but there 'tis—with a bride we must meet her half way; and she's as clean and trim herself as a hen hedge-sparrow.' My mother made no objection—took to her second-best dress without a murmur, and bought a new one for the Lord's Day."

"You're a reformed character, in fact," declared Maunder. "And I for one rejoice at it, for I've often feared you and me might some day meet in an unfriendly way when I stood for the law."

"Don't fear it," answered the other. "I'm all right and full of contrivances for making a bit of money in a straight and proper manner."

"David tells me your rabbit trap is the wonderfullest thing in that line he've met with, and good for ten pounds to sell," put in Bartley.

"More like twenty," answered Screech. "'Tis a masterpiece of a trap, and I've had a good offer or two already, but not enough."

"We get more greedy after money when we'm married, I suppose," ventured Snell. "Of course we want more then."

"We ought to have more. We're worth more," answered Billy. "The moment a man takes a serious hand in the next generation, he becomes a more dignified object and ought to fetch better money, for the sake of the wife and family. A married man ought to have better wages and be rewarded according to his breeding powers."

"And the women too. 'Tis a great fault in the State that our women don't make a penny by getting children," declared Moses.

"Unless they bring forth three at a birth," said Mr. Shillabeer. "Then 'tis well known that the Queen's Majesty sends three pounds out of her own money, to show that 'tis a glorious feat in her gracious opinion."

"Well, we single men had better waste no more time, if Billy is right," said Mattacott. "For my part I've been looking round cautious for two years now; but I haven't found the right party. 'Tis the married girls I always feel I could have falled in love with, not the maidens."

"Just t'other way with me," declared Bartley. "I like the unexpected things the girls say and do. The ways of a woman are like the ways of the mist: past all finding out."

"True," declared Mr. Screech. "I know a bit about 'em; and shall know more come presently. But like the mist you'll find 'em."

"Now here, now away again," continued Bartley. "Now lying as still and as white as washing on the hill, now scampering off, hell for leather, without rhyme or reason. And so with them: they never do the expected thing."

"True," said Mr. Moses, "you've hit 'em there. As soon as a girl answers me the direct opposite of what I expect, then I know that girl's a child no more. She's grown up, and 'tis time for her to put up her hair and let down her dress."

"Never the expected thing," repeated Crocker, meditatively. "They cry when they ought to laugh; they cuss when they ought to cherish; they fondle when they ought to whip. They forgive the wrong sins; they punish the wrong men; they break the wrong hearts."

"And when they've done their bitter worst," added Charles Moses; "when they've set a man against Heaven, and life in general, and made him pretty well hungry to creep into his grave and get out of it; when they've driven him to the edge of madness and forced him to damn and blast 'em to the pit—then what do the long-haired humans do?"

"Why, they jump into his lap," declared Mr. Crocker, "and kiss his eyes, and press their soft carcasses against him, all purring and cooing—half cats and half pigeons that they be!"

"And the men give way," summed up Mr. Moses. "Leastways the manly, large-minded sort, like 'Dumpling' and me and Crocker. We can't stand against 'em—not for a moment."

"We take, when our turn comes, in fear and trembling," continued Bartley, "and we hope we'll be one of the lucky ones."

"The fear and trembling comes afterwards, as you'll find some day, Bartley, and as Screech here may find any day," foretold Moses. "Every man backs his own judgment and will lay you any odds he's drawn a prize."

"'Tis always the other people be fools in this world," declared Screech. "It holds of life in general. 'Tis said the world be full of fools, yet no man will ever allow he is one."

Mr. Snell spoke.

"I'm sure you hear of happy marriages here and there," he said doubtfully.

"So you do, Simon. You hear of 'em—same as you hear of pixies. But you don't see 'em. Leastways I don't," answered Bartley.

"Present company excepted, I hope," said Screech.

"You forget Mrs. Shillabeer also," murmured Mattacott. "I'm sure nobody here knows more about marriage than what the 'Dumpling' do. He's seen a happy marriage."

"In a way, yes," admitted the host; "and also in a way, no. You can't be right down happy with a woman—not if you love her as well as I loved the wife."

"'Perfect love casteth out fear,' however," quoted Mr. Moses, vaguely.

"Just what it don't do, Charles; and the man that said it, saint or sinner, didn't know what it was to love," answered the old prize-fighter. "If you love a female right down from the crown of her head to the tip of her toes, and through and through likewise, you fear for her something cruel. I was built so soft where that woman was concerned, that I hated for her to go for a drive in a trap, and couldn't be easy—for thinking of the springs—till I seed her safe again. And when illness overtook her—why, 'fear' wasn't the name for it. I crawled about like a beaten dog and cringed to God A'mighty for her in season and out. But she had to go, and I had to be left. And she took twenty years of my life underground with her."

They sympathized with him; then Mr. Snell returned to the main theme.

"They'm quicker than us, however," he asserted. "I'm sure their brains work faster than what ours do. There's many a thing a woman can't make clear to a male mind, try as she will."

Mr. Crocker laughed.

"Yes," he admitted. "Such things as two and two make five—when they want 'em to make five. And they try and they try to make us see it; but we can't. And yet they are always ready to believe that our two and two be five, God bless 'em!"

"I wonder," said Mr. Snell.

"'Tis so; but you must be masterful, Simon. You must make 'em feel you're in earnest and have no shadow of doubt," said Billy Screech. "They love to see you strong, and they'd sooner see you wrong and sticking to it than be blowed from your purpose by another man.

Naught on God's earth be more hateful to a brave woman than to see her husband bested. And if a man bests you —whether 'tis at business or in any other way—don't you tell her if you can help it. Love you as she will, you'll drop in her mind and be so much the less if she hears about it."

The clock struck; mugs were drained.

"Closing time, souls," said Mr. Shillabeer; and five minutes later the company had separated and the bar was empty. The "Dumpling" mused on the things that his guests had uttered.

"'Tis summed up in that word 'unexpected' without a doubt," he thought. "Never the expected thing. And if we grant so much, then us never ought to expect the expected thing. They be all of a piece; and because my wife looked like living for ever, I ought to have knowed she'd die. I ought to have known it, and prepared for it, and laid in wait for it. Yet nobody was more surprised than me, and nobody less so than her when it leaked out of the doctor. She knowed it herself well enough; but hadn't the heart to tell me."

CHAPTER X

CRAZYWELL

NATURE, passing nigh Cramber Tor, where old-time miners delved for tin, has found a great pit, filled the same with sweet water, and transformed all into a thing of beauty. Like a cup in the waste lies Crazywell; and, at this summer season, a rare pattern of mingled gold and amethyst glorified the goblet. Autumn furze and the splendour of the heath surrounded it; the margins of the tarn were like chased silver, where little sheep-tracks, white under dust of granite, threaded the acclivities round about and disappeared in the gravel beaches beneath. Upon the face of the lake there fell a picture of the bank, and it was brightened, where heather and honey-scented furze shone reversed with their colour-tones subtly changed by the medium that reflected them. But at midmost water these images ceased and fretted away into wind-ripples that frosted and tarnished the depths. And there, when the breeze fell dead for a moment, shone out the blue of the zenith and the sunny warmth of clouds. At water's brink stood three black ponies—a mare and two foals of successive births. The mare's daughter already attained to adult shapeliness; her son was a woolly baby, with a little silly face like a rocking-horse. He still ran to her black udder when thirsty and flew to her side for protection if alarmed.

Peace, here brooding after noon, was suddenly wakened by the stampede of half a dozen bullocks, goaded by gad-flies. Down they came from above with thundering hoofs and tails erect. They rushed to cool their smarting flanks, sent ripples glittering out into the lake, and presently stood motionless, knee-deep, with their chestnut coats mirrored in the water.

Upon the side of the pool there sat a woman—as still as a picture in a gold frame. She was clad with such sobriety that one might have thought her a stone; but she moved and her sun-bonnet shone as she flung it off and then wiped her hot forehead with the fall of it, For a moment she thought of the legends of Crazywell and cast back in her memory for the evidence of their truth. Here was a haunt of mystery and a water of power. Voices

murmured in this hollow once a year, and if none of late had heard them, doubtless that was because none permitted himself or herself to do so. A spirit neither malignant nor benign, but wondrously informed, dwelt here—a sentient thing, a nether gnome, from whom was not hidden the future of men—a being who once a year could cry aloud with human voice and tell the names of those whose race was run. All dreaded the sortilege of the unknown thing that haunted Crazywell; but since its power was restricted to Christmas Eve, little general sense of horror or mystery hung over the pool. For Margaret Bowden, however, it had always possessed a sort of charm not wholly pleasant. She avoided the place of set purpose and was beside it to-day by appointment only. Another had named Crazywell as a tryst, and she lacked sufficient self-assertion to refuse. Now she blinked in the direct sunlight and longed for shade where no shade was.

She envied the kine below, and being in a mood a little morbid, by reason of private concerns, she cast her thought further than the cattle and pictured the peace and silence beneath the heart of the water. A long sleep there seemed not the hardest fate that could fall on human life. There was a man—and Margaret had known him—who drowned himself in Crazywell. By night he ended a troublous life, and joined the spirit of the pool for a season. Then he floated into light of day again, and was found by his fellows. They drew him out and called him mad, and buried him in the earth with Christian burial, that his wife's feelings might be saved a pang. Yet nobody knew better than the coroner's jury that this man was very sane, and had shortened his own life for sound reasons. Margaret remembered that at the time she had blamed him much, but her mother had not blamed him. And she herself, having been married nearly a year, no longer blamed him. Who was she to judge? If she, a happy wife, could look without horror at Crazywell in this unclouded hour, was it strange that an unhappy man might do more than look, but rest his head there?

"A happy wife—so happy as any woman ever can hope to be, who—who——"

Her thought broke off. She envied the mare at the water's edge. The pot-bellied old matron stood still, and only moved her tail backwards and forwards to keep off the flies. The foal galloped around her—playing as children will.

"So happy as any wife can hope to be, who has no child."

Margaret made herself finish the sentence; for everything

that happened to her now revolved upon it. She explained the least little cloud or shadow of cloud thus; she referred the least impatience or short word to the same cause. There was no rift, no failure of understanding, no lessening of love—so the wife assured herself—but she must do her duty. She must not much longer delay to bring to David the thing his soul most desired.

Her thoughts ran unduly upon this theme, and her own anxiety seemed like to stand between her and her object. She exaggerated the truth; out of a natural and innate diffidence she imagined a condition of mind in her husband which did not exist. David indeed desired children and expected them; but he was in no violent hurry, and had not as yet even entertained the possibility of having none. When she mentioned the matter, he consoled her and blamed her for giving it a thought. In reality, the thing in their lives that she marked and deplored and thus explained, belonged to a far different and deeper cause. After love's fever, certain differences of temperament began slowly and steadily to declare themselves. There was no radical change in David; but his self-absorption increased with his prosperity—a circumstance inevitable. For comradeship and for sympathy in business he had Rhoda; and her understanding of dumb animals so much exceeded Margaret's, that brother and sister unconsciously made common cause and seemed to live an inner life and develop personal interests from which Margaret found herself in some measure excluded. None could be blamed. The thing simply so fell out; and as yet not one of the three involved perceived it. David and Rhoda were full of his enterprises, and she did much man's work afield for him and advanced his welfare to the best of her strength and sense. Margaret shopped, cooked, mended clothes, and made ready for the others in the intervals of work. She relieved her sister-in-law of much sewing and other toil that Rhoda might have the more leisure to aid David. This woman, indeed, was unlike most women, and for that reason she did not clash with Margaret as much as another might have.

Rhoda Bowden had struck an observer from without as an exotic creature, who homed here by accident, but who by right belonged to no dwelling made with hands. A sister of the deep green glade was she—a denizen of the upland wilderness and the secret antre. She followed the train of Silene. The silver light and the domain of nocturnal dew were hers. Silence was her familiar; from her own brother she hid a part of her days and her nights. And of the

varied aspects of her mistress, the moon, Rhoda shared not a few. The young of beasts seemed her special care and joy.

"The tender whelps, new-dropped, of creatures rude,"

found a ready friend in her; but while thus gracious to all the lesser things that shared her place in time, this girl revealed for humanity, beyond her brother, but little love. She was zealous for him, but in other men she stood as heretofore: in an attitude enigmatic, tending to aloofness. Margaret, however, had yet to be convinced that she was not to be won.

To women Rhoda's aspect of late was made more widely manifest. Out of her own virginal fount of feeling no drop of sympathy with the unvirginal could flow; and the thing that Dorcas had accomplished was above all measure infamous, treacherous to womankind, beyond hope of pardon in her eyes. Had the power to do so rested with Rhoda, she had swept her sister out of life; and in her mind this yielding wanton, and her husband, and her new-born baby were already as objects dead and banished from existence.

Margaret's thoughts now centred on Rhoda and she lost sight of her own misty tribulations. Two great problems awaited solution, and with the optimism of a large heart this woman hoped yet to solve them. She wanted to see Rhoda a wife; and she wanted to see her reconciled to Dorcas. The one achievement might depend upon the other. Let Rhoda once wed, and there must come understanding into her life.

Margaret had spoken often, with tact and warmth, of Bartley Crocker; and she had been helped in a very valuable quarter, as it seemed, for David also considered the man as among his closest friends at this season. There had recently been some talk between them of a sort specially interesting to David, for Bartley was attracted, or declared himself attracted, by the prospect of leaving England to farm in Canada, and the information he had gathered together respecting that wider world of the Colonies could not fail to be of interest to Bowden. At David's invitation Bartley had spent a Sunday afternoon recently at "Meavy Cot"; and Madge was now at Crazywell to tell the lover what had followed his visit.

She waited yet half an hour; then Bartley appeared on the hither bank of the pool, looked about him a while, caught sight of Madge's sun-bonnet and approached her. So busy with her own thoughts was she that she did not

see him until he was beside her: then she rose and bade him find some shade.

"The sun's that fierce I must get out of it," she said.

Thereupon he took her to a little glen close at hand—a lip through which the pool sometimes overflowed in winter—and under a whitethorn they sat down together, while Margaret, looking at the golden furzes in front of her, spoke to him.

"I do believe the gorse be going brown already. Just a little gladness we get from it, then 'tis gone again, like a candle blown out."

"What a thought! You're down I see. No use saying you're not. And of late you've been like this more than once. 'Tis for me to talk to you to-day, I think. 'Tis for me to tell you what I saw last Sunday at 'Meavy Cot,' not for you to tell me what fell out after I was gone."

"I'm cheerful enough—only wisht to spend such a long day away from David. He's to Tavistock again. He's terrible hopeful of some work there; but I hardly think he'll get it—hasn't been well enough eggicated, I fancy. Though clever enough, I'm sure."

"He don't know everything, however."

"Who does?"

"He don't know a thing or two that even I could teach him."

"Such as upholstering?"

"Just so. I upholster chairs—at least I know how to. And you upholster David's life—make it easy and comfortable and soft at the edges. But what about your life, Madge?"

"Well, what about it, Bartley?"

"I suppose 'tis infernal impudence of me," he said. "All the same I'm an old friend and one good turn deserves another. You're trying to help me to get what I want; I wonder if I could help you a bit here and there?"

"Whatever do you mean? And what did you see at our home that makes you say such a curious thing?"

"'Tisn't what I saw, but what I didn't see. But there, what on God's earth am I saying? 'Tisn't to you I should speak."

"Go on and tell me."

"I can't, for I can't give it a name. Only somehow—look here, I'm a fool to touch this. I'm talking too soon. I must wait and see a bit more. You can't have your mind in two places at once, Madge. I'm not myself of late and very likely I fancy things. You'd reckon I had enough to think about without mixing up myself in other people's

business. But you are different to everybody else. I feel we've been hunting in couples of late, and so your good's mine."

"How you run on! And that wild. I don't know now what you're talking about, you silly chap."

"More do I. I only know two things for certain. And one is that my mother is worse, and the other is that your sister-in-law was jolly interested in what I said about Canada. Did you mark that?"

"She was. The wildness and bigness of the land would draw her to it. I meant to tell you. After you'd gone—but I am so sorry about your dear mother. I thought last week that she seemed a little better."

"No—not really. It's got to be. God knows that if talking would mend her, I'd talk for a year. But it won't. So go on about Rhoda, please."

"Well, she didn't say much herself, but she listened to my husband after you'd left us, and when he asked her joking whether she'd like Canada, she said quite seriously that she would. 'Twas the great size and wildness of the place took her mind. 'To think of them woods and the wonderful creatures in 'em!' she said. And when David thought how fine 'twould be to have a bit of ground pretty near as big as all Dartymoor for your own, she nodded and her eyes shone."

"But she couldn't go out walking all alone of a night there," said Bartley. "There are bears, I believe, and Indians, too, for all I know. But very like she'd take to them—bears and Indians both. I dare say now one of them grimy, naked-faced men with their features looking as though they were cut out of stone, and a hat of hawks' feathers, would please her better than ever I shall."

Margaret laughed.

"You must persevere," she said. "You must be patient too. After she refused you she was more than common silent for a month. She thought a lot about it and went afield more than usual with naught but dogs for company. Keep at her, but don't ax again just yet. Time ban't ripe."

"D'you think if I was to offer to go to Canada and make her mistress of a mile or two of it, that she'd be more like to say 'yes'?"

"'Tis a great question that, and I won't answer 'yes' or 'no.' 'Tis very difficult to guess what's passing in her mind, for her face don't alter like most faces. 'Tis more the light in her eye tells you."

Mr. Crocker nodded.

"I've marked that. Her lips and brow don't play and lift like yours. She keeps her mouth shut and her eyebrows steady. But her eyes talk more than her lips. She likes me—I do honestly think that, Madge."

"I'm glad of it. I've gone as near as I dare to asking her what she thinks of you, and I've sung your praises—not from myself, mind, but as an echo to David. But she gives no sign. She listens and her face don't alter. I'll do all I dare, but with such a maiden we must be very nice. If she thought I was your side trying to help you to get her, she'd never forgive me."

"I know how clever you are. And David not against it neither; though I can't expect him to wish such a thing, for she's as good as a couple of men to him. In fact, no two would do what she does for him. Hirelings can't work like them that labour for love. She'd make a model wife for an open-air man. And if I win her, Madge, 'twill be farming without a doubt, for a shop would be no use to her—nor to me neither, for that matter."

Margaret laughed out loud at the idea of her sister-in-law in a shop.

"Naught will ever tame her down to that," she said. "'Twas a pity you learnt the upholstering business, Bartley. It didn't lift you in her eyes, I'm afraid."

"Let her say 'yes,' and I'll learn what she pleases that'll help to make a living. I'd very well like to go to Canada and grow apples and corn."

"So would she, I do think—if she could get to care enough about you."

"Why shouldn't she? A maiden can always find one chap that's good enough to marry, and I'm sure she'll not meet with a better in these parts."

"I'm very sure she won't."

"Well, then, I've a right to expect her to give in. There's nobody else? You can honestly say there's nobody else, Madge?"

"There's always somebody else where a pretty girl be wife-old," she answered. "In the case of Rhoda—well, it seems absurd—it is absurd—too absurd to be true, and yet I won't deny there's something in it."

"You mean that bearded antic of a Snell?"

"He's very much gone on Rhoda in his cautious, lizard sort of a way. He looks at her in church."

"Yes, like a cow looks at a passing coach. Surely that slow-witted, knock-kneed shadow of a man can't interest Rhoda?"

"Such things ban't easily explained, but it's true that

he's about the only male that ever keeps her talking. I wouldn't say that he ever dreams of such a thing as marriage, but——"

"Good Lord—marriage! I'd so soon expect to see him a bishop as a husband. What now can it be that she likes in poor Simon? I wish I knew, for I'd try to copy it."

"I've oft wondered. 'Tis something in the air of him that makes her feel easy and friendly."

"I wish he'd got the wit to tell me how he does it."

"He doesn't know—more does she. But there 'tis: she can suffer him: she can even talk about him."

"Try and see what the trick is, Madge. Ask Simon to tea and watch 'em together. What do they speak about?"

"I'll do what I can. She was a bit niffed with Simon last week, however."

"Angered with him! That's a bad sign, if she could be interested enough in such a shadow as Simon as to be cross with him. She've never been cross with me—not since we made it up."

"She was angry because Mr. Snell has got rather friendly of late with Billy and Dorcas Screech. Their house is near his work and he drops in sometimes, I believe. He told Rhoda that the baby was very like its grandmother to Ditsworthy Warren, and Rhoda flared up and answered that she'd thank him never to name it to her again."

"Another mystery in her. If I ever have any luck with her, the first thing will be to make her a bit kinder to women, Madge."

"She's kind enough; but to say it without feeling, she's narrow and she hates the mother business. She never will be fond of childer, I'm afraid, Bartley."

"Then we shall be of one mind there anyway. I don't like 'em either—never did and never shall."

"Wait and see. You'll change from all that nonsense."

Suddenly Bartley started.

"Talk of—there goeth Rhoda by the footpath yonder."

"So she is! Fancy that. I'll call her. She's on her way to Ditsworthy till evening. But I thought she'd gone long ago."

Bartley whistled and a solitary fox-terrier, who was the woman's companion, rushed over to see what was doing. He recognized Margaret and stopped; then he turned, held up a paw and waited to see whether Rhoda was coming after him.

Madge called and Rhoda came to them. Mr. Crocker greeted her with friendship and Margaret asked where she had been.

"I fell in with your brother," she said. "Bart was up over rounding up some ponies. Him and your father have got ten ponies for Princetown fair and they hope great things from them. But they'll not do so well as David's—they ain't so forward as our three."

"A lucky chance this," declared Bartley. "I'm just going up to Ditsworthy myself to see Mrs. Bowden. My dear mother's weaker and she wants to have a talk with her old friends before 'tis too late."

"I'll tell mother for you," said Rhoda. "Only last Sunday she was wondering if Mrs. Crocker would care for to see her."

"I must tell her myself and carry back her message to my mother," answered the crafty lover. His parent had expressed no desire whatever to see Sarah Bowden; but the excuse came as an inspiration to the man.

Rhoda said nothing and he spoke again.

"Perhaps if you are going that way, you won't be offended if I walk along with you?"

She shook her head, implying that he was welcome.

"I've gathered a bit more about the backwoods and the life out in the Dominion of Canada, you must know. And I was wondering if, among all your brothers, there might not be one, or perhaps two, as would like to make their fortunes there. 'Tis a pity for all to bide on the Moor."

"So I think," said she. "For men to be cooped up, like chickens on a run, is a vain thing. I'd much wish for to see them go out in the world a bit—same as other young men."

"If your brother Drake had been spared, I'm sure he'd have gone," said Crocker, with a twinkle of the eye.

Madge saw the jest, but Rhoda quite failed to do so.

"That's so silly as mother," she said. "But I should like to see Nap and Wellington under articles to some trustworthy farmer in them parts. 'Twould make men of 'em. The whole family can't be rabbit-catchers."

This common sense impressed Bartley not a little. It was another side of Rhoda, familiar enough to Margaret, but not to him.

They departed now together and Margaret heard Rhoda laugh as they went. Such an exceedingly rare sound cheered her not a little. It rang like a hopeful augury, and she rejoiced for Bartley's sake and went home happy.

CHAPTER XI

REPROOF

LIFE is an unconscious effort on the part of the individual to get the world to see him at his own valuation; and some by force of will partially achieve it; and some by preciousness of attributes are justly appraised above their own self-estimate. David Bowden was respected and counted a man of weight—a rising man, a man whose honesty, industry, and sense achieved increasing prosperity, and whose justice and goodness of heart robbed his success of bitterness to all save base minds. But Margaret's character, so largely different, won open love. The folk nodded appreciation when her name was mentioned and old eyes brightened at it. Sympathy from her own brimming cup poured over; and the people, perceiving this couple from the outer standpoint, declared that no such happy diversity of qualities ever before mingled to make a perfect union.

But it was not quite the union of the moss and the stone; where the hard is made lovely by the soft and, in return, establishes a sure, enduring foothold for it. There were permanent disparities in the texture of their characters that neither could alter and neither could suffer without pain. David frequently failed to see Madge's point of view: she was constitutionally unable to harden her nature that she might accept his attitude. Out of this disability grew hunger and dearth in the woman's spirit: discomfort on the part of the man. He tried, as far as his nature would let him, to bridge the gulf; and she came to the other side and held out her hands to him. Sometimes they touched for a glad moment, but only thus briefly; and despite his deep affection and her passionate worship, these vital constituents of character stood between them, deep-rooted in attributes beyond the power of love to overthrow. Unconsciously he bruised her; unconsciously she aggravated him. His native spirit held the wider outlook of her charity and lenity as weakness. Sin and the sinner were closely allied in his judgment; therefore her tolerance, her magic ingenuity of excuse for error, her clemency and her patience with folly puzzled him. She had a genius for identifying herself with those the world

forgot or shunned. She was a champion of failures; and her attitude to the sick, the wretched and the outcast, sometimes troubled David.

On one occasion she caught an evil from a house full of sickness and brought it home, so that David, too, fell ill and was from his work for three days. When the doctor came and bade him keep within doors, he turned on his wife, and for the first time, she saw him angry with her. The incident passed; the sting lasted a long while. Her attitude to Dorcas won a milder reprimand; but here she was obstinate and asserted her own liberty of action. She visited Dorcas; rejoiced in her happiness and content, and congratulated her on the reformation she had achieved in her husband. But David held off and waited to see Billy Screech return to his irregular ways; while Rhoda kept her word and saw her sister no more.

It happened that David found his wife on an afternoon in autumn going to the house of Mr. Screech with a basket on her arm. She never openly irritated him by visiting his sister under his eyes, though her friendship with Dorcas was not hidden; but now it chanced that husband and wife unexpectedly met. She was on foot and he rode. She smiled and stopped. He nodded and asked where she was going with a full basket.

"Not to they Fosters, Madge? There's some bad catching sickness there, and I won't have it. I can't afford no more of that nonsense."

"I'm going to see Dorcas."

"What for?"

"Because her li'l chap's queer. Nothing at all, David—only a bit of a tissick on the chest. And I've made up some cautcheries* after a recipe of mother's for him. And this here's a bit of that big, blue-vinnied cheese as you said we never should be able to eat. 'Tis a pity to waste it."

"Anything else?"

"No—except a pint of whortleberries what I gathered yesterday; and a couple of they pigs' trotters for your sister."

"Can't they pick their own whortleberries?"

"Dorcas be a thought poorly herself. There's another little one coming a'ready."

He frowned and sat still on his horse, looking straight between its ears.

"Always swarm where they ban't wanted—like bees," he said. Then he turned to Margaret.

* *Cautcheries*=Physics.

"Give me that food. Let Screech buy his own cheese. I'm going up over to see my mother. I'll carry it to her."

He held out his hand and she took the cheese from her basket and gave it to him.

"And no more of this, my dear. I'm not going to keep other people's children—because I haven't got none of my own. And don't you never think so, Madge; because if you do, you'll think wrong. Good-bye for the present. Don't think 'tis hard: 'tis only sense."

He put the food in his pocket and rode on; she stood and watched him; then her lips parted a little and as she pressed them together tears started from her eyes. There was none to see and she made no effort to restrain her sorrow. Her face was still tear-stained when two men overtook her and Bartley Crocker, with Billy Screech, bade her good day. Billy was in a hurry and had to call at his home on the way elsewhere. He dearly liked Margaret and now, hearing that she was on the way to see Dorcas, took her basket for her. Mr. Screech rapidly passed out of sight and she was left alone with Bartley.

He spoke at once.

"What's amiss?" he said. "You've been crying."

"Nonsense!"

"I dare say it was. Still, you have. And if 'twas nonsense, you can tell me so much the easier."

"Some silly trifle. You oughtn't to have taken any note of it."

"I've just met David—going up to Ditsworthy. He must have passed you. Well, well—no business of mine, Madge. I'll say naught and ask you to forgive me for being so bold as to see. Only I'm different to other people. We've got such a lot of secrets—you and me."

Instantly she confided in him.

"I know 'tis naught but your soft, silly heart, Bartley. We'm too much alike here and there, you and me. But David's always right, and I do vex him with my foolish ways—too well I know it. I *can't* be so firm and just as him. God knows I try; but my mind ban't built in his manly pattern. I'm all for forgiving everybody and being friendly with everybody. He says I'm no better than a spaniel to fawn, but——"

"Don't," said Mr. Crocker. "Don't tell me no more, Madge. I quite understand. 'Tis the man's nature to be firm and stern, same as it is yours to be soft and gentle. You've got to meet one another. He must try and be soft, and you must try and be hard. I don't suppose either of

you can succeed; but if you try—and yet what silly rummage I be talking!"

"I vexed him rather sharp a moment ago."

"Look here!" he exclaimed. "In a bit of a cloud like this, Rhoda ought to be the very one living creature of all others to put everything right. Don't you see that with her sort of nature—as firm as David and yet a woman—she ought to be able to see both sides and just speak the very word and do the very thing to make all go smooth and happy?"

"I'm sure she would if she could," answered Margaret at once. "Rhoda and me are capital friends nine days out of ten. But of course she's more like David than me."

"I heard Screech say she was David in petticoats; but that's only rude, foolish nonsense. She's a woman, and she must have a woman's softness and gentleness and understanding for women hidden away in her—a clever, beautiful creature like her."

The lover spoke and Margaret did not contradict him. Bartley, though he could arrive at fairly accurate estimates of character as a rule, proved blind where Rhoda Bowden was concerned. He had judged her better in the past; but now he only loved her and erred accordingly.

"Trust to her; tell her," he advised. "She can do anything with David."

And Margaret, knowing perfectly well that Billy Screech's opinion of her sister-in-law was the more correct, yet took some heart of hope from Mr. Crocker's advice and promised him to do as he suggested.

"But what am I to waste your time?" she asked. "Such a happy woman as I be. To see such a foreign thing as a tear on my cheek! No wonder you was surprised. 'Twas all about nothing really and I'm ashamed of myself. Now let's talk of you. When be you coming up again to tell us more about Canada?"

"I've forgot all about it," he answered. "The question is, when am I going to ask Rhoda to go there with me? I feel 'twill be do or die next time. But I can't wait much longer. Then there's my mother. She'll be gone by October, they say. 'Tis curious how she hankers after that man, Charles Moses, now. And I'm sure he's terrible kind. Comes in when he can and reads the Bible to her by the hour. Mr. Merle's very good too. But she'd rather have Moses than anybody."

"There's you."

"Yes—me first, poor dear. I've scraped the skin off my throat, as you can hear. I was reading to her till three

o'clock this morning. Then, thank God, she got off to sleep."

They had reached the home of Dorcas and there parted. Margaret went in and Mr. Crocker, with a resolution recently made and carefully concealed from her, proceeded towards Sheepstor.

He had decided to speak to David, and since, knowing himself tolerably well, he guessed that time might very easily destroy this intention, Bartley proceeded then and there to the way by which Bowden would return to his home. In a dingle not very far from Dennycoombe he waited, and after two lonely hours, during which he considered the probable futility of his intention, David came along.

He was in good spirits and asked his old adversary to return home with him for a cup of tea.

"I know you'll need no second bidding," he said, "for my wife have told me about your fancy for Rhoda, and though I can't further it, I'll not stand in the way if 'tis to be. You'd better come and tell her some more about foreign parts; she likes that better than courting. If any man ever wins her, 'twill have to be a wild man of the woods, I reckon."

Crocker, pleased that David was in a mood so easy, nerved himself to a dangerous task. He had decided to do no less than try and light Bowden's imagination. This on any subject had been a difficult feat; but since the man's own wife was the matter, Bartley felt that he could hardly have attempted anything less likely to succeed or more likely to end in tribulation. Indeed, as soon as his mouth was open he regretted his unwisdom; but it was then too late to draw back and he proceeded. Chance inspired him to make an excellent case and speak with very genuine discretion; but David was a long time silent and the other feared that he had done more harm than good.

"'Tis well we met," he began, "for I want to speak to you, David. And 'tis a kicklish subject at first glance; but not at second. I mean Margaret. You know very well I wanted to marry her once, and you know she loved you better far and you won her. But though she never would have taken me for a husband, yet I've been close as a brother to her all my life, and she's fond of me too in her way."

"I know it," said Bowden. "And why not? Fond she is, else she wouldn't take so much trouble to try and get Rhoda to have you."

"Exactly so. And now I'm coming to the tricky place

in our talk. I met Margaret a bit agone—mind, I'm talking like her brother might—and she was crying. Just after leaving you it was, David. I asked her what was amiss, and she told me 'twas all her weak nonsense. Then it came out—as a sister to a brother. She'd vexed you and she was cut to the heart about it. She loves the ground you walk on, David; and when she don't hit it off with you—when you look black at her—'tis like holding back water from a flower. By God, she droops!"

"Crying, you say?"

"Had been, and couldn't hide it. You'd never have known it; but I said to myself, 'that man don't guess what he is to her, or that a cold word frets her like a wound.' Be angry with me if you like, Bowden, and tell me to mind my own business. I'll take it now—now that I've told you."

David stopped and got off his horse.

"I'm not angry," he said. "The question is, what have you told me? I'll thank you to say it again; and don't fear to use clear words. I like 'em best."

"The point is that busy as you are and up to the eyes in affairs and beasts and money-making in general, you've missed a lot in Madge that's worth finding out. And you must find it out if you want her to be a happy woman."

"What don't I know?"

"You don't know how to humour her."

"A sane, grown-up woman don't want humouring surely?"

"Every woman that ever was born wants humouring. Think now. Don't you humour Rhoda? Don't even Rhoda do and say things you can't fathom now and again? Don't you give in to her against your own better knowledge now and then—for the sake of pleasing her and so that she may the quicker do as you want her to do next time? Be honest—don't you?"

Bowden looked at the other with surprise and nodded.

"Lord! How you know the ins and outs of 'em!"

"Not me. No man ever can. We just glimpse a bit here and there. But this I know: patience is the first virtue with women. Patient, as a spider, we've got to be when the fly is a female. Now Margaret feeds on one thing, and if you hold it back you starve her. That's sympathy, Bowden—just a natural, tender sort of feeling such as you don't hold back even from a cow that's just dropped a dead calf and had her trouble for naught. I'll say it in a word and trust your large sense and justice not to be angered. You're not so kind as you might be to Margaret.

'Tis summed up in that, and I ask you to forgive me for saying it. I've naught to gain, and everything to lose by losing your friendship. I wouldn't have spoken such a strong thing for any less serious reason than her happiness. And now you can tell me to go about my business if you please, and I'll gladly go."

"Wait a bit and hear me," answered the other. "I can see, fixed up as you are, and hoping what you hope, that it wasn't all fun for you to say this to me. You're not the sort of man as ever goes across the road to teach other people or meddle with them. And that's why I've listened so patient to you. Some—most men—I'd have stopped at the first word; because most men be very fond of giving advice and lifting themselves above their neighbours; and that sort I very soon put in their place if they talk to me. But you don't offer your opinions unasked as a rule, and you've knowed my wife since she was a baby, and you'm a thought like her here and there—a softness there is in your nature. 'Twas pointed out after our fight."

"I said that very word to her to-day," answered Bartley. "'Tis because I'm rather the same pattern as she that I can feel so sharp about this as even to risk your friendship by speaking. She'd die for you; but would you die for her, David? Well, yes, without doubt you would; but do what's harder. Try to do the little, twopenny-halfpenny, every-day sort of things for her that'll show her she's never out of your thought."

The other had retired into his own mind and failed to hear this admonition. His intellect moved much more slowly than Crocker's, and he was now retracing an incident.

"To show you the softness of her," he said, "I may tell you that when you was coming to see us, she begged me to take down the fight-colours—the two handkerchers you might have seen hanging in shiny wood frames one on each side of the parlour looking-glass in my house. She said that it would hurt your feelings cruel to see the signs of the battle there, and I think even Rhoda looked a sort of question with her eyes at me. 'But no,' I said. 'He's not a fool. 'Twill be no pain to him to see 'em.' And I wouldn't take 'em down. Rhoda saw it my way; but Margaret kept on to the end that 'twas not a proper thing—'specially as you came at my invitation to tea. Yet, of course, you didn't mind seeing your fogle there?"

"Not a bit in the world. A very natural and proper place for it. But don't it show what stuff she's made of —Margaret, I mean?"

"It do," admitted David. "I thank you for saying these things to me. I'm not above learning from any man or woman either."

"Learn from her then. You can't learn from a better. Be out of bias with her no more."

"I'll have a tell with Rhoda about it. 'Tis the little silly things, as you say, that please women. I do big things when I can, you must know. There was another twenty pound put out at interest for her last month. But she didn't take much delight seemingly in a valuable matter like that. She thanked me loving enough, but not as though she knowed what it means to earn and to save twenty pounds."

"She'd sooner you took her back a bunch of they wild strawberries out of the hedge than all the money in Tavistock," declared Bartley. "Foolish, if you like, but take my word for it, David. She's built in that particular way. Try it."

Bowden laughed.

"If any man had told me that I should ever listen to such a lot of sense from you, I'd have judged him mad," he answered. "Yet here it has come about, and I thank you, honest, for trying to do me a good turn. And succeeding too. I'll see how a little silliness will work. Perhaps a holiday come the next revel. Good-bye—unless you'll drop in for a bite."

"Next week, perhaps. But there's a lot of trouble afore me just now. My mother——"

"You're welcome when you please to come," concluded Bowden, and re-mounted, full of his own thoughts. It was characteristic that when the other mentioned his dying parent, he said nothing. He had heard, but the ready word made no effort to leave his lips. He was for the moment quite occupied with his own business. Crocker left his old antagonist very full of thought and, when the younger was out of sight, Bowden, at a sudden whim, took his advice literally, dismounted again and tethered his horse. Then he ranged about and gathered a great bunch of wood-strawberries that clustered in a dewy hedge and shone ruby-red in the level sunset light along the lane.

They would have been a very real and deep joy to Margaret; she must have been the nearer to his heart that night by the tie of that simple thought; but such an act was foreign to his nature. He fell to thinking how really and practically to please her, and in the light of definite and weighty deeds, this piece of sentiment looked

in his eyes so exceedingly foolish, that he flung the berries away impatiently long before he reached home.

What would anybody have said, he asked himself, had they seen the busy and prosperous David Bowden carrying along rubbish from the hedgerow, like a child playing truant from Sunday school ?

That night, after Margaret had gone to bed, he talked with Rhoda concerning her, and Rhoda was deeply interested and anxious to fall in with his purposes. David mentioned the source of his inspiration, and finding that he showed no anger against Bartley Crocker, his sister took the same attitude. They strove very steadily henceforth to please Madge, and to understand the things that were good to her. They tried hard, and in a measure succeeded ; for Margaret was quick to mark their efforts and gather happiness from them. Yet the attempt could not largely avail ; because sympathy, without imagination to light its way, can only grope in the dark and, groping, perish.

CHAPTER XII

THE COURAGE OF MR. SNELL

THE instinct which drew Simon Snell towards Rhoda Bowden; the instinct which, exemplified in her, suffered the advance without active discomfiture; while slight and subtle, was none the less real. There was that in this simple soul which suited the woman; or if such an expression is too strong, she found him more easily endured than any other man. Most girls fled instinctively from Simon. The dullest found him dull; the least humorous found his beard a jest; the worst educated discovered that they possessed wider knowledge than he. Yet Rhoda, who was not stupid, who was handsome, and who enjoyed a measure of sense, could accede something to this egregious man that she denied all others. She did not spurn him and she did not find his companionship a joke or a bore. On the other hand, she did not seek him and made no attempt to better their acquaintance.

Simon, for his part, developed similar and even stronger sentiments; and he had wit sufficient to perceive that any increase of friendship must come from him.

He debated the matter in his mind with oriental deliberation; and he consumed several months on the great problem of whether he should or should not ask Rhoda to take a walk with him during some Sunday afternoon. His inclinations varied, and occasionally he believed that to walk with her was desirable; but more often he feared that such an action would be too definite and must commit him. Moreover, he felt extremely doubtful as to Rhoda's reply, and, thanks to a spark of imagination in his character not to have been suspected, he believed that if she said "no" he would feel very uncomfortable.

She met him on a day when the first opinion was uppermost, and almost before he knew it, Mr. Snell had succeeded in asking Rhoda if she would take a stroll with him upon the following Sunday afternoon. She replied without emotion that she was engaged to dinner with her parents at Ditsworthy.

"The next then," faltered Mr. Snell. As he spoke, he determined with himself that in thus pressing himself upon

her, he had gone too far, and he prepared to leave her. To his surprise, however, Rhoda agreed.

"If 'tis a fine afternoon Sunday week, I'll come. But not if 'tis pouring torrents," she said.

"I'll be to your house at three of the clock," he answered.

Then he left her and found himself in great agitation. This was the most audacious thing that he had ever done. He felt proud and alarmed by turns. As the day approached he heartily hoped that it might be wet; but it arrived clear, cold and fine. Therefore he went forth in his Sunday clothes, reached his destination too soon and waited out of sight behind a stone, until his watch told one minute to the appointed hour.

Rhoda was ready for him and they set off together up the valley. From his cottage door David watched them and smiled grimly. His sister had not mentioned her appointment, and both Margaret and her husband were exceedingly surprised.

"It can't surely be that poor Mr. Snell——?" said Madge.

"Anything can be," he answered; "but 'tis hard to believe. On the whole—no. It amounts to naught. Look at the way Simon carries his legs—that loose from the thigh—that loose and wandering, as though they belonged to Guy Fawkes!"

"'Tis a most amazing thing, David, what different sort of people sometimes have something in 'em that draws them together willy-nilly. But Bartley!"

"'Tis no good looking that way," he answered with decision. "I sounded her as to the man a bit ago, as I promised. She's got no fancy that way, Madge, and the sooner he knows it the sooner he'll stop wasting his time."

Meanwhile Mr. Snell walked beside Rhoda and talked of the amazing number of water-rats in the leat. Presently he lifted the theme to poultry, and then, returning to the water, detailed the exact manner of his professional labours. She said little but listened to his statement of facts. His mind was only constituted to assert crude happenings. He had no ideas, no theories, and few opinions.

"You can see the tower of Princetown church very clear from here," he said; "but if a mist comed over, it would be hidden."

She admitted that this was so.

"A gentleman stopped in our best bedroom and parlour a year back," continued Simon; "and his custom was to paint pickshers. And once I comed this way and he

was painting pretty near where we be standing now. And I made so bold as to look, and then I made so bold as to talk, because the gentleman axed me what I thought of it. 'You've left out the church tower,' I says to him. 'Yes,' he says, 'twasn't like I was going to stick such a beastly ugly thing as that in the middle of they hills.' So he left it out, though to my eye 'twas the most interesting sight to be seen."

"Did he make his pickshers for pleasure, or did he get anything by them?" asked Rhoda.

"He lived by 'em. He said to me once that there were one or two sane men in the world who bought everything he liked to paint. 'Twas a very curious speech to my ear. And to be honest with you, I didn't like his pickshers—messy and half done to my eye—very different to the pickshers you see on grocers' almanacs, where everything, to the hairs on a horse's tail, be worked out to a miracle."

"Have 'e seen they pickshers that David got to Tavistock?" she asked.

Mr. Snell had seen them; but with a great and sudden access of cunning he replied in the negative. He expected her to invite him home to do so; but she did not.

A silence fell until they came to a clapper bridge of rather narrow dimensions.

"Shall I hand you over, miss, or would you rather go alone?" he inquired.

But Rhoda had crossed before he finished the question.

The church-tower seemed to draw his eyes like a magnet, and after further silence Mr. Snell began to talk about it again.

"'Tis a very wonderful and curious thing that the old prisoners made thicky pile," he said. "You might not know it, but so it was in ancient days."

"Very sad for them, because they was foreigners," ventured Rhoda.

"Exactly so. 'Twould be a very sad thing to have a wife and family and be shut away from them."

"Yes."

"Very sad without a doubt."

"Yes."

Mr. Snell next ventured on a great generality.

"I don't think 'tis a very good plan for fighting men to marry," he said.

"Perhaps not."

"Because, if they get the worst of it, and get shot dead or taken prisoners, or any such like misfortune, their children and females have to suffer."

Rhoda did not answer.

" 'Tis a deep question, if you come to think of it, miss, who ought to be married and who ought not to be married."

" There's a lot married as had better not be," she declared.

" I quite agree, I quite agree," answered Simon ; " and you might even go so far as to say there's a lot might be married who ain't."

" There's a lot don't want to be, I believe."

" Women, I grant you. I do think here and there you'll find a woman who won't change the single state, along of experience with married sisters, or babies, or cross-grained men, or what not ; but us was telling to ' The Corner House ' a bit back along, and it seemed the general idea that there comes a time in every manly mind when the chap cries out for a wife. Should you think that might be so ? "

" How should I know ? "

" Beg pardon, I'm sure. Perhaps 'twas a silly question to put to a young woman. No offence, I hope ? "

" Yes, it was a silly question."

" Sorry, I'm sure, and I hope you'll overlook it. But, when I ax myself if ever it was so with me—but perhaps it don't interest you ? "

She considered before answering, then replied :

" I don't much care what men think, but if you want to tell me, tell me."

" Not at all—far from it, I'm sure. For that matter I couldn't tell you very easy. I haven't been throwed much with the female kind."

" So much the better for you very like."

" I quite agree—as a general thing ; but, however——" he broke off and looked at his watch.

" My word, only four o'clock ! Who'd have thought it ! " he exclaimed.

" In my case I've been throwed a lot with men," said Rhoda.

" So you have, and no doubt you'll understand 'em pretty well. In fact, you're as brave as most men. I'm sure now you are braver than me."

" Ban't you brave then ? "

" I'm brave by fits and starts," said Mr. Snell. " With cattle, yes ; with horses, no. When I was a little nipper, not above twelve or thirteen year old, a wicked horse got me down and bit my shoulder to the bone. He'd have killed me in another moment, but the Lord sent a man with a pitchfork and I was saved. But I feared a horse from that day, and if I could show you my shoulder, which,

of course, I wouldn't offer for to do, you'd see how I was manangled by the teeth of him."

"Some horses be as uncertain as dogs, and they've got terrible long memories—better than ours sometimes."

"No doubt you know, so full of learning about four-footed things as you be."

"We'll turn now, please."

"Certainly. Us have come a longer way than I thought to. But you step out something wonderful."

"I like walking."

"So do I—nothing better. I go along ten miles of the leat six days a week, winter and summer. You might be surprised to know that I go more than three thousand miles in the year. 'Twas done out in figures by Mr. Mattacott all quite correct."

They had turned, and now walked a considerable way in absolute silence. Then a neighbour came in sight, and Mr. Snell grew nervous.

"There's that clacking creature, Mary Main. She haven't seed us yet. If you'd rather for me to go away afore she does——?"

"Yes, if you like."

"It might be better—unless—— Well, here's good-bye then for the present, and I'm very thankful to you for walking—very thankful and no less."

"Us have had a nice walk."

"I quite agree, I'm sure; and thank you kindly; if I get over this here wall I can pick up the leat yonder; and to see me by the leat will be an everyday sight for anybody."

"Yes, it will."

He hurried off, and Mary Main, when she met Rhoda alone as usual, had no idea of her recent great adventure.

What impression the walk with Simon left in the girl's mind none ever knew; but Mr. Snell felt mildly elated by the achievement, though he told nobody about it. He was secretive, and his own mother knew nothing of his thoughts. Indeed, she was scarcely aware that he did think. Rhoda, too, confided in none but her brother. She said nothing about her amusement, and when Margaret openly asked her if she had enjoyed it, she did not answer the question, but replied with some other matter. It happened thus.

"Did you like Mr. Snell's opinions?" asked her sister-in-law, as Rhoda took off her hat and came to the tea-table.

"They horned sheep have all gone down in a crowd from the high ground, and they want to be driven back,

which I'll do after I've had a cup of tea and changed my clothes," said the other.

Six weeks later there fell out an unfortunate incident which went far to extinguish the slightly closer understanding that had obtained between these women since Bartley Crocker met David. By ill-fortune Madge annoyed Rhoda exceedingly, and her brother was also implicated. Mr. Snell, however, suffered most in the sequel. With great circumspection he had avoided Rhoda for a month after their walk, then he met her and proposed another.

" 'Twill have to be short, for the evenings close in so," she said.

" I like the dark so well as you, however," he assured her.

" I only like the dark alone," she answered.

" How coorious ! I only like it in company," he declared. " But, if you'm willing, I'll be so bold as to call at the cot half after two come Sunday week."

" I shall be home that day. I dare say my sister-in-law will come too."

" As to her——" began Mr. Snell, then he checked himself. " She's a very nice woman ; in fact, you'd have to look a long way further than Sheepstor parish to find her equal," he declared. And then he went his way, dimly conscious that he had chosen his words awkwardly.

When he arrived Rhoda was ready, but Margaret had a cold in her face, and the other had not asked her to join the party. Mr. Snell's appearance came as a surprise, and David spoke.

" Why, here's Simon again ! So 'tis him you be prinked up in that new hat for, Rhoda ! "

Margaret laughed despite herself, and the virgin flushed ; but with anger.

" Look at her roses ! " said David, whose Sunday dinner had left him in an easy mood. Then his sister instantly restored him to seriousness.

" How dare you ! " she cried. " How dare you laugh, Margaret, or you say such things, David ? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. I won't see the man ! Never again will I see him ! 'Tis you coarse creatures ought to blush—not me ! "

She left them, went to her room and refused to descend though Margaret came up and pleaded with her.

" Tell him to go," was all that Rhoda said.

Mr. Snell was placidly regretful to hear that Rhoda had a headache.

" The headache is a very painful thing ; but she'll soon be rid of it," he said. " Us was going for a walk, but 'tis

not of any consequence. I can go just as easy alone. Or I needn't go at all, come to think of it."

He went to the gate, hesitated, and returned.

"When she comes down house again, you might give her my respects," he said; "and if 'tis her stomach that is out of order, there's nothing better than a little cold onion broth without salt, taken when the organs all be empty."

"I'll tell her," promised Margaret, and Mr. Snell shuffled off.

He walked over the exact ground of the former peregrination and recalled the former topics very accurately.

"I shall leave it now till well on into the new year," he told himself; "then, if my feelings be so fierce and fiery as they seem to be at present, I might offer for to go walking again. There's naught like a walk for helping a male to see into the female mind. 'Twas Crocker, I remember, who said in the bar that if you could get a girl to laugh at your jokes, 'twas a great thing done. But 'twill have to be something out of the common funny to make that woman laugh. And as to making a joke—I don't know I'm sure."

CHAPTER XIII

RHODA PASSES BY

A GREAT uncertainty prevailed above Margaret Bowden, where she sat on the lofty side of Lether Tor before noon and waited to meet Bartley. The aerial doubt was reflected on earth in shadows and darkness shot with fitful light; an increasing opacity threatened rain; yet, where the vapours crowded most gloomily and massed their hooded cowls, light and wind would break their conclaves and scatter them upon the humid bosom of the Moor. Through this welter, sun-shafts fell and flashed over the grey and russet of the wilderness.

A sort of mystery belonged to the day seen in its huge encounter between cloud legions and the light of heaven. Strange things might have been happening within the penetralia of the fog-banks, where they drove through the valleys gloomily. There was an air of mighty preparation, of imminent explosion, of forces stealthily taking stand and making ready to declare themselves in elemental encounter between the armies of the sun and the rain. Light and darkness joined battle, and mother earth lowered heavily, in mood to welcome the victory of her own innumerable cloud children. The sobriety of the hour increased. The distant details of the land faded; the tors ascended solemn and purple above the grey.

Yet, through loopholes in the driving fog, the sun still shot his arrows strongly and, where they fell, there broke forth fire on dene and dingle, and small roof-tree isolated in the loneliness. The watcher marked a sudden shaft sweep the vale of Kingsett with a besom of light, while another radiant gleam broke the clouds, descended upon her old home and set the far-off whitewash glimmering like a jewel at the throat of Dennycoombe.

Now the high lands southerly shone for a moment; now the ragged crest of Sheep's Tor was glorified with a nimbus of light, that revolved in a broad, wet fan, and then shut up again, as the clouds thrust between sun and earth.

In process of time, as the war swept hither and thither, there grew a cheerful hope in Madge's mind that the clouds might be beaten. When all seemed lost and new vapours gathered even to her feet, she saw the upper heaven shine

with sudden access of glory. It collected in close, dazzling centres; it pierced and riddled the fog beneath with silver that warmed into gold. And then the earth, that had taken service with storm and lifted her dark bosom to welcome rain—the faithless earth paid court to the conqueror and welcomed him with beauty. No longer she sulked; no longer the tors and hog-backed hills answered the dark strata of the sky with greater darkness, and spread beneath the sullen colours of the clouds a face still more sullen. Instead they donned a brighter aspect; while banderoles of blue unfurled aloft in the widening rents of the cloud rack. A great wind gathered strength, scattered the mists and drove them flying down the hills; there fell warmth on the watcher's cheek; the world smoothed out her granite wrinkles, smiled and reflected the azure of heaven upon her manifold stony faces, her waterways and plains. Light conquered, and upon the skirts of the defeated fog there burnt cold fires and glimmered the iris.

This transformation and overthrow of the day's dark prophecy much heartened Madge. The victory of sunshine lifted her spirits unconsciously. She grew happier with the unfolding serenity of the hour; and she was singing to herself when Bartley Crocker arrived.

Of late not seldom they had met unseen in lonely places, far afield. Sometimes she waited for him by the great menhir of Thrushel Coombe; sometimes at Plym Steps; sometimes in spots even more remote, haunted by the heron and the shadows of clouds. But during the past fortnight Margaret had only seen Mr. Crocker on one occasion, when she called to know of his mother's fading health. Then he made the present appointment; and now, as she sang, he climbed up through the wild clitters of Lether Tor to keep it.

"Go on," he said. "I heard you long afore you saw me. 'Tis pleasant to my ear; for naught be singing just now but the robins."

"I was cheered somehow when the sun mastered the fog."

"How's Rhoda?"

"Very well. She'll come this way herself presently, by Nosworthy Bridge."

"Mr. Snell called again?"

"Not again. 'Tis a pity you can't see a bit more of Rhoda, however."

"My mother wouldn't let me out of her sight at the last."

"Well I know it, poor dear. How does she find herself to-day, Bartley?"

"A bit strange, no doubt; but with my father to show her the new place. She's dead."

"Dead! Oh, Bartley!"

"Yes—thank God. Faded out at four o'clock yesterday morning. Flickered out just the same as a night-light flickers out. Wavers and shakes—then steadies down again—then gets brighter than ever—then grows dim—slowly, slowly, till there's naught but a bead of fire left. And then a flash, and then—gone. And your eyes think it's there still; but it isn't."

"Dear Bartley, I'm so sorry for you."

"Are you? But I know you are. Not many else will be—not many but me and my Aunt Susan. She's torn to the heart. I couldn't stand no more of it."

"I'll see your aunt to-morrow. I'll see her to-day."

"She'll thank you. Make it to-morrow. My dear mother wasn't a very much sought-after woman—too wise for that, I expect. But you could comfort her sister. Nobody else will trouble about her."

"To-night I shall go down."

"The funeral's on Tuesday. Would you put her to the west where the big holly tree is, or under the sunny wall where the slates of the Moses family all stand?"

"She'd have liked to be buried by her husband. She told me so."

"I know; but 'tisn't convenient. He lies at Honiton, and 'twould cost a king's ransom to take her there. But I asked her almost the last thing, and she thought and shook her head. Past caring then."

"Me and David will be at the funeral—I can promise for myself, and I'm pretty sure he'll go."

"D'you think you could get Rhoda to come? D'you think I might go so far as to ask her to come?"

"I'm sure she'd go if she thought it would give anybody any pleasure."

"Not pleasure exactly. You might almost say 'twas business more than pleasure. Don't think I'm hard-hearted and all that sort of thing; but when you're in love like I am—everything—even the funeral of his own mother—is used by a man to his advantage if it can be. To feel like I feel for Rhoda makes me as hard as a millstone for everything else. I want her at the funeral; because if she sees me there burying my dear mother, it may bring a pinch of softness to her. I've planned to get her there if 'tis possible."

Margaret stared at him in wonder.

"Don't think me daft. I'm suffering enough; but

'tis man's way to look on ahead. And I can't look on ahead into nothing. I've grown to feel to Rhoda that she's got to marry me. And yet 'tis idle to pretend that I've much right to be hopeful. What's the best news about her ? "

" There's no news, unless her long, lonely walks be news. She must think of something when she takes 'em. She can't talk to the dogs all the time. Her mind can't be empty, can it ? "

" Certainly not," Mr. Crocker assured her. " She must be travelling over something in her brain, if 'tis only the joneys on the mantelshelf in your parlour. But it isn't about me and Canada she thinks, I reckon. Canada, perhaps, but not me."

" I will say this : there's no unfriendliness in her. I never hear her speak a word against any man, bar William Screech. And I go in hopes that she'll forgive even him and Dorcas."

" She'd forgive 'em right enough if she was married to me. Anyway, when my dear mother's laid to her rest, after a few days are past, I shall ask Rhoda again. The time has come to do it."

" I think it has."

" Will she be along with you at Christmas ? "

" No," answered Margaret. " 'Tis ordained that we all go to Ditsworthy for Christmas dinner. 'Tis a longful time since David was to home, and his mother has planned this."

" Well, you must ask me a bit later. Or I'll try to get David to bid me come and eat along with you after New Year. I may tell you this : David wouldn't make any objection."

" None—none at all."

Bartley began to spare a little thought from himself for Margaret. He had often wondered whether his plain hints to her husband brought any fruit for her. To-day he was in a high-strung and somewhat emotional mood ; therefore he did not shirk the subject as usual, but prepared to plunge into it.

" Let's get down the hill," he said. " We'll go so far as Nosworthy Bridge together, if that's not drawing you too much out of your way."

" 'Twill suit very well," she answered. " I want to meet Rhoda, and she'll be fetching back by the bridge afore long."

" You'll be hungry."

" No ; I've got a bit of bread and cheese in my pocket. You can have half, if you mind to."

He shook his head.

"Can't eat to-day. 'Twill be a fast day in my life for evermore."

"Dear Bartley, I don't say much. Who can say anything to the purpose against such a loss? But I do feel for you."

"I know it, Madge. Nobody'll feel for me like you. Give me your hand. 'Tis a thought steep here; but it leads to the best road to the bottom."

He helped her down the crooked acclivities, and in half an hour they were at the bridge beneath.

Here Meavy opens her arms, and shutting them again creates a little island. The waters join once more below and sing and foam under the ivy-mantled span of one grey arch. To-day naked boughs thrust up from the drooping red mat of the brake-fern, and the leaves of the willows were reduced to a mere sparkle of yellow on the boughs. Only the greater furze laid a heavy green in great masses on the harmony of winter colours.

Bartley led the way by mossy stones beside a backwater where dead leaves danced.

"We'll sit on the island," he said, "while you eat your food. There's an old hurdle there, and I'll put my coat over it for you."

A few moments later they were talking about Margaret's self, and she felt her heart flutter somewhat at this sudden and very unexpected change of subject.

"D'you mind what you told me some time since, Madge?" he asked. "At least it can't be said you told me; but, between the lines of things that you spoke, I somehow pieced together a sort of feeling you wasn't as happy as you'd a right to be."

"How can you think so? I'm sure——"

"Well, anyway it got into my stupid head, and as luck would have it I fell in with David a bit after I'd left you. You must remember the day, Madge. It's idle to pretend you've forgot."

"Yes, I remember. I was down-daunted and silly. You oughtn't to have thought twice about my feeble grumbling."

"You didn't grumble. Another person would have marked nothing in what you said; but I know you so well—quick as lightning I am where you are concerned, or any woman I care about. And I talked to David."

She started and stared at him.

"Then I'm very angry indeed with you, Bartley."

"Are you? Well, he wasn't. There's few more sensible, clever chaps knocking about than your husband. Like a

flash I opened his eyes, and he thanked me for doing it. Thanked me, mind you."

"Opened his eyes! Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean I opened his eyes. He's a terrible busy man and I'm a terrible lazy one. And 'tis no use being lazy if you can't use your time to do the busy folk a good turn. Fools would say 'twas interference; but not a wise man like David."

"What did you tell him?"

"Say you forgive me."

"It depends what you said."

"It depends on the result of what I said. I told David that I reckoned he was—well—too busy. I said he dropped you out of his life a bit too much and didn't humour you enough. I told him plump out that he wasn't so kind as he might be. Now you're properly angered with me, no doubt; but just think if you've a right to be."

She was silent and her flush faded and her eyes fixed on him and grew puzzled.

"'Twas only because I knew him so well and his straight, just way that I dared," he continued. "And now you've got to say if that talk did harm or good. And if it did harm, heap hard words on me; but if it did good——"

She put out her hand impulsively, but not until a silent minute had sped. During the moments she retraced the past and remembered what had surprised her and made her happier. Then she stretched out her hand and clasped his.

"Good came of it," she said.

"If that's so, I've gained something to-day as well as lost something, Madge."

"David—it shows what he is, Bartley."

"Yes. He's high above anything small or mean."

She continued to reflect. It was impossible to say much more on the subject, and, indeed, the brightest that could be said was spoken. The wife, though she knew that her husband had long since resumed his old absorbed attitude and found less and less leisure for amenity and tenderness, could not whisper this outside her own heart.

"It was good and brave of you," she said. "And dear David belongs to the large-souled sort of men that ban't above learning even on such a sacred, secret business as his wife. But he knew you had known me ever since I was a little girl."

Bartley nodded.

"So long as you can tell me that good came of it, I'm content. Now leave it. Eat your lunch and then I must

go. And strive to bring 'em both—Rhoda and David—to the funeral."

"All Sheepstor will surely go."

She brought her food from her pocket and he watched her eat some little sandwiches made of bread and cheese. Their backs were turned to Nosworthy Bridge, but they were quite visible from it.

"There's more here than I want," she said. "I wish you'd take some."

The whimsical child in the man, even on this dark day, broke loose.

"Feed me," he said. "Don't think I'm a fool for asking; but feed me. I mean it. 'Twill comfort me. I'm cruel miserable, though not to the eye."

Of old she remembered his follies and fancies.'

"When you was young you was always like a little, silly, petted bird or puppy," she said, smiling.

"So I often am still—and especially when I'm down on my luck. There's no dear, silly mother to pet me no more and make me chirrup again. How she would do it! Feed me, Madge."

She held a sandwich to his mouth.

"One more."

"Here's four more. Eat 'em quick. And then we must get going."

One by one she put the morsels of food to his lips, and laughed at him in spite of herself while she did so. Then he thanked her and declared that he was much the better and happier for her charity.

"Mother's in heaven," he said. "And I'm going to her again some day. If a man believes that really, and doesn't only fool himself to think he believes it, 'tis the greatest comfort of all. And I didn't ought to be miserable to-day, and I'm damned if I will be."

"Of course you believe it. So do I—heart and soul—and so do every true, faithful Christian creature."

"Of course. Didn't you say you counted to meet Rhoda here?"

"Yes—'tis time she came by."

"I shall pass her going back; and I'll tell her you're at the bridge waiting for her. Good-bye, Madge; and the Lord bless you for the kind things you've said to me."

"And thank you, too, Bartley, for—for——"

"That was naught."

He helped her back from the island to the road; then he left her and went his way in expectation of meeting Rhoda

at every turn. But he did not meet her, because she had already passed by.

She had flitted swiftly over the bridge; but stricken to passivity by a sudden and astounding sight she had stood a moment upon the farther side. She had then gone forward without disturbing those who astonished her.

Therefore Margaret and Mr. Crocker were wholly unaware that Rhoda Bowden had seen her sister-in-law not only putting food into the man's mouth, but also laughing at him while he ridiculously imitated the fluttering action of a fledgeling bird.

Rhoda gasped and slipped her foot once or twice from sheer absorption of mind as she proceeded homeward. She considered this spectacle in the light of news just gleaned at Sheepstor.

"And the man's mother not much more than cold in her grave-clothes!" she thought.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

MYSTERY

THE company at "The Corner House" had divided into two groups, and each was concerned with a separate subject. Mr. Shillabeer himself, with Bartley Crocker, Mr. Moses, Simon Snell and Bart Stanbury, discussed a strange phenomenon that had of late startled the dwellers at Sheepstor; while, with their backs to this throng, Ernest Maunder, his friend Timothy Mattacott and Billy Screech, whispered together upon a private problem.

"The thing can be explained in a word," said Moses; "there be amongst us some high-minded, religious creature that have got hold of this way of advertising the Truth. He have said to himself, 'There's naught like a gate to catch the eye of the passer-by.' And so, where a gate happens to stand by the wayside, he have gone by night and painted up a Bible truth. Farmer Chave found '*Prepare to meet thy God*' on his bullock byre yesterday morning, and there's '*Eternity*'—just that one solemn word—on every second gate betwixt here and Meavy."

"He's come out our way too, since last week," said Bart Stanbury. "There be a text up over on the moor-gate above our house: '*Now is the accepted time.*'"

Young Stanbury was courting a girl at Nosworthy Farm, near his home, and this text, staring out of the dawn-lit desert, had come to him with the force of a direct command. But he made no mention of its private significance in his affairs.

"The party means well enough," declared Bartley. "There's no doubt about that. And it can't be denied that coming upon these solemn things all of a sudden makes men and women think. The puzzle is to know who's doing it."

"Some of the people that own the gates don't like it, however," said Simon Snell. "Farmer Bassett, out to Yellowmead, says 'tis a form of trespass and battery to write on a man's gatepost; and it don't bring you any more within the law because you write up Scripture. The man stuck up '*Let there be light*' on Mr. Bassett's big gate—the

one going into his four-acre field—and Bassett was cruel vexed and said as how he'd let light into the chap himself if ever he caught him."

"And he's cleaned his gate with sand-paper," added young Stanbury.

"'Tis written on again since then," said Mr. Shillabeer. "I was that way not long since, and there's words written there again—namely, '*God is Love.*'"

"Strange thing is that Ernest Maunder on his nightly rounds should have never catched the man," mused Crocker.

"Not at all," explained Mr. Moses. "The man no doubt knows the way of Ernest's beat as well as Ernest himself do, and avoids him. They were saying yesterday that it might even be parson's self; but of course that's a rash and silly idea. His reverence is as much interested in it as anybody—especially since he found '*The Lord loveth a cheerful giver*' on his own back-garden door—the one that leadeth out into the lane. He holds that the man means well; all the same, he wants him catched and stopped."

"What could be done to him if they did lay hold on him?" asked Reuben Shillabeer.

"Why, there you beat me," answered Moses. "I'm sure I don't know. The lord of the manor might talk to him; but I don't think any law has been broken, whereas 'tis certain many people have been made to think about religion in consequence."

"My mother for one," asserted Mr. Snell. "She came across '*After death the Judgment*' 'pon a broken paling out Yennadon Down way, and it turned her faint on the instant and made her very unwell. But 'twas all to the good, as she herself declared two days afterwards. The man's doing a very proper work, whoever the man is."

"With a pot of blacking and letters cut out of tin he does it," said Bartley Crocker. "It ought to be pretty easy to find him out. He must have been round here only a day or two ago. I see he's been busy at the bottom of your paddock, 'Dumpling.'"

"Yes," admitted Mr. Shillabeer. "He knows a bit about everybody. '*Swear not at all*' he put up on my fence, down the bottom end of my cabbage plot. That ought to be a lesson to us in this bar, for, try as I will, the crooked words slip out among you."

"I quite agree," said Mr. Snell. "I catched myself saying 'damn' to a young dog only yesternight. And no fault of the dog."

"If we was all as careful as you, no great harm would

come to the parish," answered Charles Moses. "For my part, swearing never drew me. I found I could be righteously angry without it, and also forcible of speech."

"Some fall back upon it as natural as drink," asserted Bartley, "though 'tis certainly no sign of strength to put in swear words."

"Yet Sir Guy Flamank, his honourable self, be a great hand with them," argued Snell. "I've heard him in the hunting field use the most terrible parts of speech you can imagine—though not when ladies was out, I admit that."

"Take my good friend, David Bowden," said Bartley. "No man ever yet heard him use an oath. And yet, by all accounts, nobody gets his way quicker with smooth words."

Mr. Shillabeer nodded.

"Without a shade of unkindly feeling against the man, I could wish he wasn't quite so own-self, all the same," he said. "That wrapped up heart and soul in work and money-making, that he haven't eyes for anything else in the earth."

Mr. Crocker looked round about him.

"What you say is gospel truth, 'Dumpling.' We're all friends here, I believe—friends to 'em both. Therefore none will think it anything but kindness in us to be sorry about 'em."

"I met Margaret a while back," said Mr. Shillabeer. "My wife was terrible fond of her when she was a mere strip of a girl. We had some talk together, and—there 'twas. I'd give my whiskers to make 'em go along a thought happier; and yet when you say the word, she'll have naught of it and tell you there never was a happier, luckier creature."

"In a way that's true," declared Bartley, "but in another way 'tis false. What did you say to her, Reuben?"

"To be plain," answered Mr. Shillabeer, guiltily, "I was full of rather gloomy thoughts along of it being the death-day of the wife. And I said, in my darkness, that self-slaughter might not be all bad, if a man had outlived his value. And she reproved me—yes, she said the word in season."

"You oughtn't to think of such things, Shillabeer," declared Mr. Moses.

"I know it, Charles; yet thoughts will come over the mind unbidden. But leave that."

"As to David, he's easier to talk sense to than you might think," added Crocker. "I risked it once, and he took it in a very manly spirit that made me respect him

more than ever. But I doubt he's forgotten it all long ago. Why for don't you try, Moses? You're a light among us and carry the weight of the church on your shoulders. Catch the man coming out one Sunday and go a bit of the way back-along with him, and some of us will take Madge and Rhoda out of earshot."

"No," answered the shoemaker. "Don't ask me to attempt any such a thing. You can't alter it, and they can't alter it. 'Tis in them: they're built so. Just a pinch of salt makes or mars a stew, and just a pinch of character makes or mars a home. If we even knew exactly what 'twas, we couldn't alter it. You can't pull out a bit of human nature, like a hollow tooth. Just an over-seasoning of pepper in a man, or a pinch of softness in a woman, may spoil all. It takes terrible little to wreck a home, and I've known large tragedies rise up out of naught but a taste."

"That's true," declared Bartley. "A man with a failing, or a fancy, as wouldn't count against him in one woman's eyes, may come to eternal smash on it if he happens to wed with another woman. 'Tis the little twists of character that lead to the biggest troubles, as the acorn breeds the oak."

Mr. Shillabeer obliged with an instance.

"I knowed a very good Christian girl who was a moderate drinker and never dreamed of taking a thimble too much afore she married. And she never would have done so afterwards, but for the bad luck of her husband being a furious teetotaller. I've seed that man talk about drink till you'd think he was blind drunk himself! And so he was—drunk with rage at the thought of there being such a thing as drink in the universe. And what come of it? She took to drink, that woman did, driven to it, you might say, out of sheer spite; and the man catched his only son market merry at ten years old; and he dashed him to the earth in his righteous indignation and broke the poor child's arm in two places."

"'Tis just the sort of thing that happens every day," declared Charles Moses, mournfully. "But, please God, with the Bowden pair, they are both too sensible to drift apart. 'Tis a terrible sad thing to see husband and wife lost, as it were—each feeling along alone, trying to find the man or the woman they loved and married, and not finding 'em. For why? Because each have gone back to themselves, and put off all that hoodwinking toggery they was hidden in during the courting time. We talk about being disguised in drink, Reuben Shillabeer, but we ought to

talk about being disguised in love also. There's naught makes a man act further from his true self than wanting to win a woman."

"'Tis supposed to bring out the best of us; but I'm with you there; I don't know that it does," said Bartley.

Mr. Snell stared.

"For my part, though you might say such a man as me hasn't the right to lift his voice afore such a learned person like you, Mr. Moses, yet I do believe in love. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I've felt it more than here and there—back and forward, like rheumatism, according to the state of the blood and the season of the year; but when it comes, it makes me more valiant without a doubt; and that's to the good."

Mr. Crocker looked at his rival. Then he opened his mouth to speak; and then he shut it again and kept silence.

Elsewhere Mattacott, Maunder and William Screech debated a great matter. They argued now as to whether Mr. Shillabeer should hear the secret, and the policeman advised against it.

"An honest and an upright man, outside prize-fighting," he said; "but in this you can't expect him to take sides. We are all his customers—Bart Stanbury just as much as Mattacott here; therefore I say, 'keep the thing from him.'"

"And from everybody," added Mattacott. "If it gets out, all's marred. The fewer hear of it, the better; and I hope you won't tell your wife, Billy."

Mr. Screech laughed.

"That shows how little you know of the world, Timothy. Why, 'twas my wife had the brilliant thought! She knowed Mattacott wanted for to marry Jane West, and I told her how another man was after Jane also, and that she couldn't decide between 'em. 'Then,' says Dorcas—quick as a needle, that woman—'Jane believes in all that rummage about Crazywell. So what Mattacott have got to do is to plan to get her that way come next Christmas Eve; and he've got to lie hid; and when he sees her, he've got to shout out the name of t'other chap; and Jane will think 'tis the spirits; and she'll fancy t'other chap is bound to die afore the year's out; so he'll be no good to her whether she likes him or not. Then, of course, she'll take Mattacott.' Those were her very words, as near as I can call 'em home. And when did you hear a cleverer thing?"

"'Tis terrible clever," confessed Mattacott. "But Jane West wouldn't never go up past the pool alone on Christmas

Eve for a hundred pounds; so us must plan somehow for somebody to go along with her. 'Tis a very tricky business to be drawn into a plot."

"All be fair in love," said Mr. Maunder; "else, of course, I couldn't countenance any such a plan. But the matter is outside the law and therefore I'm not called to take any steps—especially as I very much want to see Mattacott get the woman. He's the wrong side of forty now, and 'tis more than time he was suited, if it is to be."

Mr. Mattacott looked across jealously at the innocent Bart Stanbury.

"He's too young for her even if she'd have him," he said. "'Tis his sandy hair and his blue, silly eyes have made her think twice about him."

"Keep to business," interrupted Billy Screech. "Now it's agreed we get the girl to Crazywell come Christmas Eve next; and that's nearly two months off, so we've got plenty of time to cabal against Bart. The first question is, who shall take her to Crazywell on the day?"

They all frowned over this problem; then Screech solved it brilliantly.

"Why, Bart hisself, to be sure! What better could happen? He hears his doom come up out of the water; and of course, even if they was tokened, he'd have to release her after that. Any man would have to do it."

They applauded and Mattacott was especially enthusiastic. But the policeman acknowledged a doubt.

"It don't strike you as too terrible a thing?" he asked. "For my part, as a tender man, though guardian of law and order, I can't think we should let the fellow hear his own fate. He might believe it and go mad. Stranger things have happened."

"Have no fear: he won't believe it," said Mr. Screech. "'Tis her that will believe it, and 'tis her that we want to believe it."

"A fine stroke certainly—to make Bart hear it himself," admitted Maunder; "that is, if I've got your word for it the man won't be hurt in his mind by such an adventure."

"That's settled then; and now there's the great question of who does the spirit," continued Screech. "Of course, 'tis Mattacott's job—not mine; yet I must point out that his voice is not well suited to the deed."

"I wouldn't do it for anything," said Mattacott. "I'm naught at a pinch; and if 'twas thrust upon me to do it, fifty to one but I should go and lose my head and very like shout out the wrong name, or some such foolishness."

"'Tis true," said Maunder. "With all your good gifts,

Timothy, you're the very man to make a mess of this. Besides, your voice will surely betray you."

"I ax this here chap to do it," said Mattacott, turning to Screech himself. "Maunder, no doubt, would do it for me, as my lifelong friend; but he's a government servant and his time is not his own. Therefore I ax Billy; and, if it goes right, I'll pay him down a crown; and if it don't go right, I'll pay half-a-crown; and who can say fairer?"

"So far so good then," summed up Billy; "and I'm bound to say I think you're right. I can put a hollow sound into my voice and bring it up from my boots, in a way that would make any girl go goose-flesh if she heard me after dark on a common week-day, not to name Christmas Eve at Crazywell. Leave that to me when the time cometh. Now the next thing is, what shall I say?"

"Naught but the man's name," advised Ernest Maunder; "the less you say the awfuller 'twill be."

"Just 'Bart Stanbury! Bart Stanbury!' twice," whispered Mattacott. "You'll be snug hid in a fuzz bush, of course; and once you mark that she's heard you, you can slip off home as quick as need be to prove 'twasn't you, if anything comes to be said about it after."

Billy nodded.

"Just so; but I mustn't say 'Bart' Stanbury," he explained. "You see the man's christening name is 'Bartholomew,' and the spirit wouldn't know as we called him 'Bart' for shortness. The full name must be spoken, and that I shall do. So there 'twill be, and Jane West will believe that the man's booked for death afore another year be out."

Mr. Mattacott showed a little emotion on Stanbury's account, but Billy overruled his qualms. The matter was allowed to drop and a diversion threw the two groups together and turned conversation into a former topic.

Elias Bowden came in, cold and rosy, out of the night.

"Evening, souls!" he said. "On my way up-along, and thought I'd give the pony five minutes and myself a drop out of the special bottle. What's the best news?"

"'Tis for you to tell us what's the latest, master," said Bartley.

"The latest," answered Mr. Bowden, "is this: that pious blade with his blacking brush and his Bible have been up over! Ess fay; Nap and Wellington runned in with the news after daylight. There's no gates up my way except my own; but he'd fastened 'pon that, and there it

was. I heard a dog bark last night, but 'twas dark as pitch and no good looking out the window."

"And what might he have chosen for you?" asked Ernest Maunder.

"The solemn words, '*Jesus wept*,'" answered Elias. "A drop more water to this, Shillabeer, if you please. Yes, he'd writ those deep words there. Can't say exactly why he put them in particular; but they drive the love of the Lord into the mind and make a man religious, no doubt. Not that I'm ever anything else, when you come to the bottom of me, I hope."

"The thought that the Redeemer of mankind shed tears is a very sad thought, however," declared Mr. Moses. "And yet not all sad, if I make my meaning clear, because it brings Him nearer to us on the human side; and the nearer, the better."

"Very well put, Charles," said Reuben Shillabeer. "The nearer the better, I'm sure."

"Upon the rocks in the warrens too—so the boys tell me," continued the master of Ditsworthy. "The busy man have set up a good text or two here and there. I doubt he'll take to writing 'em life-size upon the tors next."

"That's a great idea, now!" declared Shillabeer. "Then everybody passing by could catch the Word. In fact, none could miss it if the letters was big enough."

"For that matter, if I may say so," argued Mr. Moses, "the tors be the word of God a'ready, and naught out of the Bible could make 'em grander than they be. Not that this curious man thinks so. Without a doubt he'd write great Bible news across the moon's self, if he could only find a ladder long enough to reach her; and a brush big enough for the work."

CHAPTER II

A PESSIMIST

THREE days before Christmas and an hour before dusk, Mr. Shillabeer, gun in hand, called at Coombeshead Farm, and Constance Stanbury opened the door for him.

"I'm that finger-cold," he said, "that I thought as I might make so free as to drop in and warm myself a bit afore going back."

"And welcome. Come in; come in. My husband will be home in a few minutes, so you'll have a bit of male company. We women be that chuckle-headed."

"No, no! Won't hear you run yourself down," said the "Dumpling," gallantly. "There's no better company in these parts than your company, and very few women be in it for sense alongside of you."

"Tea or cider?" she asked.

"A drop of tea, if 'tis making. And I'll leave a bird, if you'll please to accept it. The plovers are on the Moor very plenty. A hard winter's in store."

"Each be harder than the last nowadays," she answered. "And thank you, I'm sure. A plover's pretty eating, but too good for the likes of us."

"Don't you say that. You'm like me—take yourself too humble; but 'tis a mistake. People in the world always pull us a peg lower than our own conceit of ourselves. So we should screw up a peg higher—to be ready for 'em. How's Margaret? You'll never hear no two opinions about her—such an angel as she be."

"Yes," admitted Constance; "and I'm much feared that she's got more in common with the angels than us could wish. 'Tis coming over me worse and worse; and over her too, poor lamb."

"What ever do you mean?" he asked. Then he walked to the fire, removed his right gaiter and rubbed his huge leg where the strap had pressed too hardly upon it.

"My Madge is not like every girl you meet," said Mrs. Stanbury.

"Wish there was more of the same pattern."

"And I'm terrible jealous for her—I'll fight the world

for her, like a hen with one chick; because her vartues are her own, and her faults she got from me."

"Faults!—who ever heard tell of her faults?"

"I take no credit in her beautiful goodness," continued the mother. "But I take shame in her softness. Too soft and gentle and yielding she is for this world, and the people in it. And, as her parent, I'm savage—savage as a wild cat, down in my secret heart—when I see people don't understand. 'Tis me they ought to blame, not she."

Mr. Shillabeer stared. His fingers were spread and a saucer of tea smoked upon them.

"You do amaze me; but I'll make bold to say you'm all wrong for once. 'Tis her softness that people take joy in. Always wanting to do for others—always putting herself on one side."

"A few may see her goodness," admitted Mrs. Stanbury; "but what's the use of that if them nearest to her can't see? Her own husband haven't got no patience with her now and again; and, mind you, I don't blame him—such a common-sense, hard man as him. And Rhoda the same. 'Tis their natures to take a practical stand."

"Don't be downcast," urged the publican. "Drink a dish of your own tea and look on the bright side. 'Tis rather odd I should say that, seeing I've never been known to look on the bright side myself since my wife died. David's a very good chap, and nobody thinks higher of him than me; but he's just an everyday man—wise and businesslike and honest. There's naught in him would make Margaret a beautifuller character than she is. Us don't want for her to be hard and businesslike, I'm sure."

"'Tis what her husband wants is the thing, not what we want," explained Mrs. Stanbury.

"If he wants finer than she, he wants better bread than is made with wheat," declared the old prize-fighter; "and if he can't see the shining vartue and wonder of that woman's heart, he must be blind as well as busy."

"All very well; but Margaret's to blame too," declared the other.

"Never—nowhere. 'Tis always your way to give every body best but your own."

"To say 'blame' is too strong a word, perhaps; but you must think how 'tis from her husband's point of view. No children. Oh, Shillabeer, 'tis a dreadful thing! Just that might have made all right, and just that won't happen. Naught worse could have fallen out—naught worse than that. A very terrible misfortune every way. To Ditsworthy I know they take an awful serious view of it.

Naturally they would do so. And when I see that mother of a quiverful coming, I wish I could sink into the earth! Her eye brims over with reproaches, though never a word she says."

"This is all silly nonsense you'm talking," declared Mr. Shillabeer, strapping up his gaiter again. "Never did I hear such foolishness. Good Lord, ban't there enough childer in the world? Take comfort, I beg of you."

Bartholomew Stanbury entered at this moment and was glad to see the publican.

"Heard your fowling-piece banging away up over," he said, "and hoped as you might perhaps drop in 'pon the road back. Well, here's Christmas again, and like to be a soft one after all. The weather's changing."

"A busy Christmas in the village," said Reuben; "but nothing out of the common offering to happen, I believe."

"Don't you be too sure of that, 'Dumpling.' What would you say to another fight?"

"No, no, Stanbury. No more fighting. You mean your son, Bart, and that chap Mattacott. They be galled against each other without a doubt, along of a she; but fight—no. Mattacott's ten year older than your boy. Bart couldn't hit a man whose hair be turning grey."

"That's what I said. Still, they long to be at each other."

"They'll have to settle their difference some other way. No more fighting if I can prevent it. You mustn't suppose I'm what I was—far from it. I look at life quite different now. All's vanity, as the Preacher saith. I may give up 'The Corner House' afore the world's much older, neighbour."

"Good Lord! what's come to you?" exclaimed the farmer.

"What come to Bendigo," said Mr. Shillabeer, solemnly. "I've had the Light, Stanbury. Make no mistake: when the Light does come it shows up everything in a manner very different to what we've seen it before."

"Well," said Bartholomew, "don't let it turn you out of 'The Corner House.' Beer have got to be sold, and there's nothing in the Law and the Prophets against keeping an inn and giving good money's worth, same as you've always been famed to do."

But Shillabeer doubted. Having drunk another cup of tea, he rose, wished the Stanburys a Merry Christmas in a mournful voice, and disappeared. Constance shook her head when he was gone and declared that a great change began to creep over the old man.

"Mark me, he's breaking up," she said. "He's casting away all his old opinions and growing more and more religious-minded and low-spirited. Naught would surprise me. I've seen it happen before. He'll be a teetotaller yet, and then he'll go melancholy mad so like as not."

Her husband protested.

"Such a one you are for looking on the cloudy side! There's too much good sense in the man for any such thing as teetotalism to overtake him. A moderate drinker always, and won't serve anybody beyond the twinkling-eye stage. Why, he've made bitter enemies by withholding liquor where any other man wouldn't have thought twice about it. Where's Margaret to? She was coming over, wasn't she?"

"Yes," said his wife. "But 'tis nearly dark. She'll have changed her mind or been hindered."

Half-an-hour later Bart arrived, and he was able to explain his sister's absence.

"She's took ill," he said. "I met Rhoda back by Lowery. Madge have a cold on the chest—naught to name, but enough to keep her in against this fog. I'm feared they won't be able to go up to Ditsworthy for Christmas now, unless she mends very quick."

At his first word Mrs. Stanbury began to be busy. Under the lofty mantelshelf before the fire there hung a row of little linen bags, and in them were various simples culled through vanished spring and summer. They contained elder-flowers, marjoram, thyme, sorrel and calamint. She selected ingredients and took them to the table.

"Us must see to this afore she gets worse," declared Constance; and soon she was preparing a decoction of herbs.

Her son had further news.

"They'm saying to Sheepstor that Bartley Crocker's off," he announced with his mouth full.

"Off where?" asked Mr. Stanbury.

"To foreign parts. 'Twas always thought he might go when his mother died. They do say he's cruel sweet on Rhoda Bowden, but I don't think she's of the same mind."

"I've heard Madge say that she would much like it to fall out," declared Mrs. Stanbury; "but for my part, Rhoda don't look to be seeking a husband. She's different to her kind, and I don't see her either wife or mother."

Bart was reminded of another maiden and he sighed, put his hand to his chin, and looked into vacancy with a very lack-lustre expression.

"Shillabeer was here afore you comed home," said his father; "and he says you'm too young to stand up to Mattacott. You'd kill the man."

"I may yet," declared Bart, gloomily. "Anyway I can't wait like this much longer. More can he. She won't say which 'tis to be, and the strain of mind is getting a bit too sharp. Something's got to go scat afore long—either him or me—or her."

"She ought to decide, no doubt," admitted his mother. "But I hope you ban't hopeful, Bart, for I'm not. T'other's better off than you and wiser; and Jane West has found it out, of course."

"He may be wiser, or he may not be," answered Bart. "Anyway I'm too wise to wait till Doomsday; and so I've told her; and she's going to decide afore the New Year."

"She'll take Timothy Mattacott," repeated his mother. "Stanburys ban't no good at competing with other people. More was my family—they always went under; and now they've gone under altogether, for I'm the last of 'em."

CHAPTER III

THE VOICE FROM THE POOL

MR. BILLY SCREECH found himself more than usually busy on the eve of Christmas Day; but when three o'clock came he abandoned his work and set off into the Moor. A dismal enterprise lay before him, and bad weather made the prospect worse; but he had promised, and failure to keep his promise would upset others and lessen Billy's credit. Therefore he went, and presently, ascending above Kingsett Farm, reached Crazywell where it stared up out of the waste, like a blind eye in a black socket. Silence and desolation haunted the pool. It seemed an hour indeed when secret spirits might wake from sleep, rise, strike the leaden face of the waters, and bring terror to mankind. A heavy and hushed trance held the pool. But little wind blew; no cloud stirred in the grey vault of heaven; but beneath at earth level, fog crept leisurely along in streaks and hung motionless in patches. Even Billy—hardened unbeliever though he was—felt some slight uneasiness as he sank down into the hollow cup of Crazywell. The threatening mist made him both glad and fearful. It would certainly help the dramatic force of the thing to be done; but it might also increase in density and cause him to lose his way home. He turned up his coat collar, found a clump of furze near the water's brink, and settled there. All had fallen out as Mr. Screech desired, and presently Jane West and Bart Stanbury would pass that way on the road to Princetown for some Christmas shopping. Only one fear existed in the watcher's mind. If the mists increased in density, Bart might hesitate to take his sweetheart this way, but prefer to tramp round by road.

Billy had hidden himself beneath the principal footpath near the pool, and he knew that the travellers must pass by him. It was certain that he would not be called upon to wait long. He practised to himself once or twice, and as he had suffered from a cold in his throat for some days, the voice of Mr. Screech promised to be sufficiently sepulchral.

But the day grew more dark and more still. A lifeless, listless gloom haunted the spot, a blank despondency that

reached even Billy's nerves, dashed his spirit, and made him long heartily to be away. Then came the crawling tentacles of the fog, and they stole over the brim of Crazywell and thrust here and there, like some blind, live creature feeling for food. They poured down into the hollow presently and crept over the water at the bottom. Half an hour passed and the vapour increased in density. It hung drops of moisture on the thorns of the furze and spread a glimmering dew over Billy's hairy face and ragged eyebrows; it struck cold; it entered his sore throat and promised to silence his voice altogether.

"If they ban't here pretty spry, I shan't be able to croak no louder than a frog," thought Mr. Screech.

He determined to give Bart and Jane fifteen minutes more. If they had not passed by during that time, he would leave the pool. It seemed pretty certain that the plot had failed. Billy had no watch, but he began to count slowly up to sixty, and each of these instalments represented one minute. The gloom increased, and unconsciously he hastened his counting. And then he heard voices and knew that the man and woman were passing, high above him in the fog. They shuffled slowly along and both spoke, but the plotter could not hear their words. He was quite safe from possibility of observation and so rose and descended to the sandy shore of the pool. Then he lifted up his voice and astonished himself, for his words rose and reverberated in the fog with a strange resonance, quite proper to the supernatural creature that might be supposed to live in Crazywell.

"Bartholomew Stanbury! Bartholomew Stanbury!" he cried.

Then he heard a woman's thin shriek up aloft in the grey mist; and a man's voice answered:

"By God! who's down theer?"

But Billy made no reply to the question. He hastened to the further side of the pit and crawled up on to the Moor; then he ran for a couple of hundred yards, struck the Kingsett road and so got home, by Lether Tor Bridge, as swiftly as possible.

Meantime a woman had fainted above Crazywell and a man was stirring himself wildly to restore her. It was neither Bart Stanbury nor Jane West who had been shocked at the message from the pool, but Bart's mother and father. The young couple were far away, tramping in close communion along the high road; but Constance and her husband had been to see sick Madge and take her and David their Christmas gift and good wishes. They

were returning from Meavy Cot, and it was upon their ears —where they moved slowly fog-foundered above Crazywell—that this mournful doom had fallen from invisible lips beneath.

Mrs. Stanbury sank before the shock. She had just time to make her husband understand that it was the spirit of Crazywell who thus addressed them, before she lost consciousness. Bartholomew, too concerned for her to trouble about his own fate, gathered moisture from the heath, wetted her forehead and loosened her gown. But it was long before she recovered. She sat and shivered for half an hour upon a stone, and only by slow stages and with much assistance was able to reach her home.

It had grown dark before man and wife returned to Coombeshead and Bartholomew got his partner to bed. She had suffered a terrific nerve shock and was incoherent until a late hour. Then she became intelligent, and her native pessimism thus fortified, broke loose in the small hours of Christmas morning.

"Never out of my sight shall you go—God's my judge! You mustn't seek to do it, Bartholomew. Your time's drawn down to within twelve month, and us must spend it hand-in-hand to the end. Oh, that awful voice! And for me to hear the name—me of all people! God A'mighty never did a crueller thing; and if I'd knowed we was going back along by the pool, I'd rather have walked the soles out of my boots and the flesh off my feet than do it. Your name of all names, and it might have been any other man's. But you are chosen. If they'd only take me—not that I can bide after you, Bartholomew. Mark me, I shall be after you long afore you know your way about in the next world."

Mr. Stanbury, albeit a man without superstition, had also suffered not a little under the tragedy of the day. He had always laughed at the pool until now; but this was not a laughing matter. He could trust his ears and it was impossible to deny that a very extraordinary voice, hardly to be called human, had shouted his name up through the mist from Crazywell. It struck him also that the words actually ascended from the face of the water.

"Things look a bit black," he admitted, "and I'm powerful sorry I've scoffed at thicky water; but I ban't gwaine to throw up the sponge yet, my old dear, and more mustn't you. If 'tis the Powers of Darkness live in the pool, then we must call in the Powers of Light to fight against 'em. God in Heaven's the only Party who knows when I be going to be took off, and 'tis a gert question in

my mind whether He'd let it out to this here queer thing that lives in Crazywell—like a toad in a tree-stump. What do you say, Bart ? "

Their son had returned and was in great trouble at this evil news.

" I say that I'd better tell Jane not to come here for her Christmas dinner," he answered. " Mother won't be up for any high jinks to-morrow. She won't even be good for getting over to worship. She's white as a dog's tooth still. Why, there ban't hardly a spark of Nature left in her. And as for the voice, I've no patience with such things. I'd have gone down and pulled the spirit's damned nose if I'd been there, same as I would any other man's. I don't believe a word of it, and faither's right : God A'mighty wouldn't let no vagabond ghosts poke about on Christmas Eve of all times—just afore the birthday of the Lord—to frighten God-fearing, respectable people with their nonsense. If 'tis a spirit, 'tis a bad one ; and I wouldn't care no more for a bad tankerabogus than I would for a bad man."

" If us can get to church in the morn, I'll ax Parson Merle afterwards," said Mr. Stanbury. " For my part, I won't pretend I like it ; but all the same, I've got a right to make a fight for it ; and if parson be of your view, Bart, that I oughtn't to care a button about it, then I won't care."

" What's the use of telling like that ? " asked Mrs. Stanbury, fretfully. " How be twenty parsons going to overrule a voice like what we heard a bit ago ? Oh, my God ! my flesh creams to the bones when I call back them awful sounds."

" 'Twas more like a parrot than a human," said Bartholomew.

" And there'll be some such way to explain it," declared the son. " I'll wager that Mr. Merle will laugh the whole story to scorn."

" How's that going to mend it, even if he do ? " asked Constance. " Time enough to laugh when next year be dead and your father's still living. But it can't be. He's got to leave us and I want for to know what becomes of me then ? "

She relapsed into a condition of hysterical emotion, and her husband sat up with her all night.

In the morning Bart went for the doctor and also explained to Jane West that the hoped-for meeting at dinner could not take place.

A medical man reached the fastness of Coombeshead

before midday and found Mrs. Stanbury suffering from shock. He was interested and sympathetic. He drove Bart home to his surgery six miles off, and, at evening, Constance took her physic and soon slept in peace.

Bart and his father were in the habit henceforth of regarding that occasion as the most mournful Christmas Day within their memories; and when the adventure began to be known a little later, their friends deeply sympathized with them and were divided in their opinions. Some secretly hoped that the solemn tradition of the pool would be upheld, and felt that it would be better for Mr. Stanbury to pass away than that the great mystery and glory of Crazywell should vanish. Others flouted the spirit and agreed with Bart that no sane person should take this meddlesome hobgoblin seriously.

Elsewhere Christmas Day brought other discomforts. Mr. Screech and his wife and children spent the anniversary at Ditsworthy; but they went reluctantly as a substitute for David and Rhoda. This spoilt the pleasure of Dorcas, and both she and her husband were glad to be home again. They criticized everybody at the Warren House in an unfriendly spirit, and Dorcas could find nothing genial to say even of her own mother. Indeed, none of her own had ever been forgiven for their initial adverse attitude in the matter of Billy. With her father alone could Mrs. Screech be said to remain on good terms.

And while the Screech family were able to go to Ditsworthy, owing to the enforced absence of David and his household, Christmas passed pleasantly at Meavy Cot. Margaret did not know of her mother's misfortune, and as her own health now mended again, she much enjoyed the day. Moreover, there came a visitor, for David invited the lonely Bartley to share the feast, and Mr. Crocker, after hesitating between his duty to his Aunt Susan Saunders and his duty to himself, finally felt the opportunity of seeing Rhoda must be taken, in justice to his own future plans and ambitions. He went, therefore, and added to Margaret's pleasure, but failed to advance his personal cause.

The dinner was a great success, and Bartley, quite unconscious that every jest he made was damaging his most cherished hope, excelled himself in merriment, and kept David and Madge in much laughter. Rhoda's amusement, however, was at the best but frosty. She could not forget the past, and when she looked at Mr. Crocker she did not see an unstable, good-natured and kindly spirit, mentally incapable of sustained sorrow, but a man whose mother

had but lately died, and who found it possible to laugh and utter futile jests before the grass was grown upon her grave. She allowed for no extenuating circumstances; she forgot that Nanny Crocker's end was a release for which to be thankful. She only saw an orphaned son playing the fool; and that he could do so now, to the accompaniment of a good dinner, did not surprise her; for had he not done the same upon the day after his mother's death? She remembered what she had seen upon the island above Nosworthy Bridge; and she hardened her heart against Bartley and his humour. Rhoda had been influenced in other directions also by that unfortunate incident. To explain Margaret's share in it with credit to Margaret was impossible. Her brother's wife must have known that Mrs. Crocker had just died; indeed, the man had doubtless gone to tell her so. And Madge's apparent reply was to conduct herself like a silly and irresponsible child. Such an action frankly disgusted Rhoda, and she was deeply offended and shocked at it. The emotion waxed with time and even made her uneasy. She believed that with no man living, other than her husband, might a woman permit herself such pleasantries. The past looked more and more unseemly in Rhoda's eyes. It lessened her respect for Margaret, and unconsciously she showed it. Yet when Margaret, whose sensitive nature was lightning-quick to mark such a change of attitude, asked her sister-in-law how she had offended, Rhoda could not bring herself to speak. She evaded the question, but made some general allusions, hoping thereby to remind Madge of her recent folly. She failed, however, for David's wife did not see the application of a theory of man's lightness, to herself or to Mr. Crocker.

And now, at this inauspicious hour, and fired thereto by a successful dinner and an excellent opportunity, the lover offered himself again. Chance so to do was deliberately made by Madge. She planned with David to leave her sister-in-law and the visitor, and before Rhoda could avoid the trap, Bartley and she were alone together in the parlour.

"Keep Bartley in good spirits till I come back, Rhoda," said Margaret, suddenly; "I must take my medicine, else doctor will be vexed when he calls again."

She hurried off, and as David had already gone out, man and maid found themselves alone.

Rhoda frowned; Bartley pulled himself together and wished he had taken half-a-pint less of the bottled porter.

Each in secret heart was planning speech, and Rhoda,

not guessing that he had ever again thought of her as a wife, after her definite reply to his proposal, wondered now if she might reprove Mr. Crocker himself for his folly on the island. Her object was not the welfare of the man. She was thinking a little for Margaret and a great deal for David. She knew surely what David must have said had he crossed the bridge when she did. But to speak to David about it appeared impossible, for he brooked no criticism of Margaret even from her; and to approach Madge seemed equally out of the question in Rhoda's view. But here was an opportunity to speak directly to the offender himself; for it could not but be that Bartley had led Margaret into the lapse of self-respect with the sandwiches.

Rhoda's mind swiftly traced this path, and she was preparing to speak when her companion began to talk. His conversation related to a very different matter, and for some time the woman found little opportunity.

Mr. Crocker had picked up a photograph album and was gazing at the picture of the Bowden family taken at Tavistock in their full and imposing completeness before David's marriage.

"My word!" he said, "that's a proper piece of work sure enough. Let's see—father and mother—boys of all sizes, your married sister, you and David, and Dorcas and Joshua. I hope you've made it up with Dorcas, Miss Rhoda?"

She flushed.

"You'll do well to mind your own business," she said.

He shut the book and put it on the table. It rested upon a red and yellow wool mat, and he was careful to place it exactly in the middle.

"You're right," he answered. "When aren't you right? I oughtn't to have said that. It's not my place to dictate to you—quite the reverse. I'm sorry."

She did not reply and he spoke again.

"But my own business is different. I can mind that, and it's time I thought a bit more about it. Not that 'tis ever out of my thoughts really; yet life comes between a man and his deepest desires sometimes, and life—and death—has stood between me and the first business of my life lately."

"Has it?" she said in an indifferent voice.

"You know it has, Rhoda. You know what I've been through. You came to the graveside of my dear mother at my express wish——"

"'Twas at your aunt's wish—not yours."

"Anyway you came, and not being blind, you must have known what putting her into the ground meant to me."

She stared at him coldly, but did not speak. The grief that Bartley had displayed above his mother's coffin when it sank to earth was real enough. He had mourned her then from his heart. But while Rhoda watched the man weep on that mournful occasion, there had filled her mind, not sympathy at his present real grief, but sheer amazement at his past equally real levity. It was quite beyond her mental endowment to understand how the same man could laugh on the day after his mother's death, and weep at the ceremony of her interment.

Her thoughts now hardened her heart. She guessed that he was about to be personal and prepared to waste no consideration upon him.

"You'll be gone out of England soon, I suppose. What's Miss Saunders going to do?"

"Lord knows. My Aunt Susan's been rather difficult since mother died. She wants to go to Canada with me; but—well, my mind's set on somebody else."

"You'll never find anybody to care for you like she will."

"Shan't I? That's bad news," he said. "And, what's more, I'll make so bold as to question it. Why should I waste time and beat about the bush? Look back a bit—to that day on the leat path, Rhoda. Well, a lot's happened since then; but nothing has happened to my great love of you except it's grown stronger and stronger. And you, Rhoda? Don't say that you never thought of it again. Perhaps you blame me for holding off so long; but you see how I was placed. Couldn't go on with it and mother fading out day by day."

In the light of her knowledge she believed that this statement was untrue. At best the hypocrisy of it offended her. The man who played with Madge on the island was surely not the man to let his mother's last illness interfere with love-making.

But she did not comment upon this side of the question. She did not comment at all, but waited for him to make an end.

"And now, though you might think I was too near her still, yet I know it isn't so. And I ask you to remember what I said before, and answer me different. You're more to me than all the rest of the world put together, and I'm sure that I could make you a happy woman. I've watched you, like a cat watches a mouse, these many

months. I've followed your ways and learned your fancies. David's self don't know so much about you as I do—all I know of your beautiful, brave nature and likes and dislikes—down to the walks by night with naught but the moonbeams and your own thoughts for company. And you—can't you feel a bit too, and picture your life along with me away over the water? Can't you see yourself mistress of such a place as you've heard me tell about to David? Can't you let me love you and make you my dear wife, Rhoda? For God's sake think about it, and don't say 'no' again. I'll wait your pleasure; I'll not hurry you. Take a year to say 'good-bye' to Dartmoor, if you like; or stop on Dartmoor if you like; and I'll gladly stop too, if you say the word; but oh, Rhoda Bowden, do marry me and find what it is to have a husband who worships your shadow!"

He stood over her as he spoke, while she sat motionless and looked out of the window. Now she saw David returning and was glad. But her quick ears heard Margaret stop him outside, and husband and wife went into the kitchen together.

"Say 'yes' and have done with it," begged Bartley.

She was thinking, but not of him. It occurred to her that Margaret had planned the entire incident. Her thoughts retraced many past events, and she wondered how much more Margaret might have planned. Then she asked herself the reason.

Her sustained silence made the lover speak again; but she was so interested in side views of the situation that the central fact seemed unimportant. To him, however, nothing else mattered; and her answer to one who had just asked her to marry him, struck the man as extraordinary.

"Don't be dumb, unless silence is to give consent," he said; then she came to herself, looked at him blankly and shook her head.

"Good God! Is that all your answer?" he asked.

"That's all," she replied.

"Why—why—why? What's between us? I'm frank to you; be frank with me, Rhoda. It's now or never. Say everything in your mind to say. Leave nothing unsaid. What is it between us? What's the bar? Can it be got over or broken down? Where do I fail? Can I mend it? Can I change anything—everything—to please you better? Don't fear to hurt me. Anything is better than refusal."

"You're too light-minded," she said. "And, even if

you wasn't, I shouldn't care about you. You're not the sort of man that I like."

"What sort do you like then? Tell me, and I'll try to be that sort."

She did not answer the question, but reproved him for the past. It occurred to her again that by protesting now against the incident on the island she might prevent any such folly in the future. She was only considering David—not Margaret, and not the man before her.

"Too light-minded," she repeated, "and I'll tell you for why I say it. On the day after your mother died, you met my sister-in-law and it chanced that I saw you together. She don't know it and needn't. But you'd better know. The man who could play child's tricks at such a time wouldn't be trusted by any woman, I should think."

He wrinkled his forehead and endeavoured to remember.

"Whatever did you see that shocked you so much?"

She told him and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid I can't expect to make you understand that. Perhaps no woman that ever I met but Madge would understand it. Don't let that come between us. Be just. Moods and whims and silliness after a long cruel strain may happen to men as well as women."

"Well, I despise the men, or women either, who could sink to such things."

"You were at my mother's funeral. You know if I felt her loss or not."

"Things are as they are," she answered calmly. "'Tis no good telling us any more. My brother and his wife want to come in the parlour, and we're keeping 'em out."

Bartley rose.

"I'll be off then. And mark this: you'll have to listen to me once more yet before I go. No man worth the name would take 'no' for an answer under thrice."

"Better save your time. You'll never make me feel different to you. We're not built to look alike or feel alike at any point. The sooner you know that the better."

"Bid 'em good-bye for me and try to think different."

He offered his hand and she took it.

"I'll never think different so long as I can think at all," she said.

He departed, and Margaret and David saw him go and knew that he had failed.

Madge sighed for him; her husband showed no emotion.

"Come what may come, 'twill be best," he declared. "Rhoda knows her own mind; and that's more than half the maidens do nowadays."

They returned to her and found her sweeping the hearth. "Mr. Crocker have gone," she said. "I was to bid you good-bye from him."

Elsewhere the baffled suitor tramped through Dartmoor under conditions of setting sunlight and approaching darkness. Strong winds had scattered the fog of the preceding evening and now a gale shouted along the heath and drove the clouds before it. Flashes of light broke through the west and, like golden birds, floated upward over the dark bosoms of the hills. They reached the ragged summits of the land, revealed the granite there, then seemed to take wing into the sky.

CHAPTER IV

POINTS OF VIEW

THE folk were coming to church, and some walked by road; some drove from distant hamlets; some tramped by sheep-tracks and rough pathways over wide spaces of heath and stone. Down through outlying farms that stretch tentative fields into the Moor; down past gorse-clad banks and great avenues of beeches; down past Kit Tin Mine—busy then, but empty and silent now; down into the valley bottom, drawn by the thin bell music from the tower above the trees, came the family of the Bowdens. It was smaller than of old. But the boys were growing; Napoleon and Wellington had become responsible persons in the scheme of life at Ditsworthy, and even the twins could be trusted to work without a ruling eye upon them. Mr. Bowden and his wife came to pray upon this early summer noon. Of women there were only two left at Ditsworthy; therefore Sarah and her daughter Sophia had to take Sunday at church alternately; and to-day the widow stopped at home to cook the dinner. With the Bowdens came other of the people. Susan Saunders appeared beside her nephew; but he saw her to the entrance only; there he stopped and talked with a knot of men. Among them was David Bowden. He, however, stayed not long outside and soon joined his family and Rhoda. She was already seated between Joshua and her father in the Bowden pew. Charles Moses was finding seats for chance visitors; Reuben Shillabeer, who never missed Sunday service, sat in his corner, having just handed four collecting dishes to those who would presently carry them through the congregation. He was a sidesman now, and Mr. Merle held the old prize-fighter in high esteem as a valuable example to the young men.

Mr. Screech arrived with his elder child. Mattacott met him and they talked apart. Their conversation concerned Timothy himself. Jane West had ceased to smile on Mattacott since the winter; yet there was no report of any engagement between her and Bart Stanbury. The appearance of Timothy's rival cut this conversation short. He came with his father and mother. The men entered and Mrs. Stanbury spoke to Mr. Crocker.

"Be Margaret gone in ?" she asked.

"No," he said. "She's home to-day. David and Rhoda are here. Madge hasn't come."

Mrs. Stanbury sighed with dismay.

"There! And I want particular for to see her. Now whatever shall I do ?"

"Come and see her," suggested Bartley. "I'll be very pleased to walk along with you. I'm not going in. The weather's too fine to miss two hours of it, and I shan't taste another English June for many a long day—perhaps never."

Constance considered, and then, the matter being of some urgency, consented.

"I'll just go into the church and tell master I'm stepping over to see Margaret. And I shall have to get my dinner there. Everything's locked up at Coombeshead till evening. We was all going to take our meat along with Mr. Moses to-day; but my men can do so, and I'll ask Madge for a bit."

So it fell out, and Bartley, quite to his satisfaction, escorted Mrs. Stanbury to "Meavy Cot."

First he chattered about his own hopes and disappointments; then he interested himself in his companion's affairs.

"Yes, I must be gone. No good staying here in sight of that girl—only makes me savage and good for nothing."

"A pity she won't take you; but she'll never take anybody. She's cut out for the single state," declared Constance.

"How can you say that ? Was ever a finer woman seen in Sheepstor ?"

"Womanhood's a matter of heart, not body, my dear. To the eye she's female, to the mind she's male—that, or neither one nor t'other. I know all about her through my daughter. Not that I don't wish with all my heart you could have her, and take her long ways off. Not a word of unkindness do I mean; but 'twould be better every way, and better for Madge if she lived somewhere else."

"Yes—I understand that," he said. "David never can be everything to Madge while he thinks such a deuce of a lot of Rhoda. They're all good friends, however."

"Good friends enough. But 'tisn't the home it might be. You don't see, and strangers don't see; but I see, because my mother's eyes can't be blinded."

"I see too—I know very well what you mean."

"If you do, then say naught," she answered; "for 'tisn't for you—nor me neither—to stand between a man

and his wife. D'you know what Madge said to me last week? I grant she was down when she said it; but she's down too often now. She said, 'Life was sunshine with only a little cloud three year agone; now it's cloud with only a little sunshine, mother.' Not a very nice thing for me to hear. But it didn't astonish me. We're an unlucky race, I must tell you. Whether luck comes through the blood, or through some dark powers outside us, I don't know yet; 'tis a very real thing, and some has it from the cradle and some never gets a pinch of it. Stanburys don't."

But Crocker was thinking of Margaret Bowden.

"I'm terrible sorry to hear you tell this about her. She keeps such a stiff upper lip before the world and looks out with such cheerful eyes, that I never guessed 'twas quite as bad. Yet now you say it, I mind the signs."

"Keep out of it, however, and go away. You can't do no good if Rhoda won't have you."

"Don't be sure of that. I was a lot of use once. I might be again."

Mrs. Stanbury was mildly surprised.

"Seeing David's good sense and patience, I won't say 'tis impossible to do anything. But David be David, and even if he had the will to alter, how can he do it, more'n the leopard his spots? There's nothing you can put your hand upon and say 'there's the evil'; and yet 'tis clear enough. They've drifted apart through having no family. 'Tis all said in that word."

Mr. Crocker sighed and felt a moment of real sorrow.

"If she'd married me," he said, "'twould have saved us both a lot of bother."

The other did not answer and they proceeded some distance silently.

Then he turned the conversation to Mrs. Stanbury herself.

"This is telling on you too. You're not all you might be, I'm sure. I wish it was in my power to do you a good turn."

"Like you to say it. Many have to thank you for a good turn. But 'tis outside human strength to help me. I've run against the Powers of Darkness; I've heard Crazywell tell how my husband is to go inside the year."

"Does he believe it?"

"I don't know. He won't talk about it. He's very careful of hisself, and he gets a bit short if I run on about it; so we've agreed to let the matter drop. All the same it's aged him, and God knows how many years it has took off my life."

Mr. Crocker was interested.

"I only heard about it from David. There may be some sort of explanation."

"How can there be? 'Tis like a thunderbolt hung over us. Bart's the only one who pays no account of it."

"It might be him just so likely as his father," said the man. "Why are you so positive 'twas your husband the voice meant? They're both called 'Bartholomew.'"

Mrs. Stanbury stood still, stared at him and then sank down suddenly in the hedge.

"But—but that can't surely be? The one's 'Bart' always," she gasped out.

"To other people; but if this was some magic thing from another world, you couldn't expect it to care about nicknames."

"Oh, my God! where do we all stand now?" cried out Mrs. Stanbury. "Nobody ever thought of that afore!"

"One person did, if not others; and that person's Jane West," he answered. "I saw her a bit ago and asked her—out of kindness to Bart—why she held off and didn't take him. I know only too well what 'tis to be hanging about with your heart telling you not to take 'no' for an answer and your head telling you that you're a fool. And Jane said that, so far as it went, she'd decided between Mattacott and Stanbury. 'But,' she said, 'though I'm addicted to Bart and like him very well, 'tis no use taking the man if he'm going to die afore next Christmas.' 'Twas only by the merest chance she and Bart didn't hear the voice themselves, for they went up to Princetown shopping that very afternoon, and nothing but the fog made 'em go round by road."

But Mrs. Stanbury heard none of these words. She had never connected this catastrophe with her son; neither had Bart himself done so. Jane West, however, inspired thereto by Mr. Mattacott, perceived the real significance of the situation, and she proposed to wait until time showed whether father or son was to fall. Now Mrs. Stanbury was herself faced with this hideous complication, and it struck her almost as harshly as the original blow had done. Her weak mind whirled; she became incoherent and spoke without sense.

"Leave it, for God's sake," urged the man. "You'll go mad at this gait. One thing be just as absurd as t'other. Some innocent fool saw your husband through the fog and shouted to him—perhaps just wished him a merry season or some such thing—and then went on his way and thought no more of it. Be sure you'll hear the truth soon

or late, and you'll live to see your men as well and hearty next January as they are now."

"You mean kindly to say these things," she answered. "But 'tis vain, and you'll know it afore the year's gone."

"Well, give God Almighty a chance," he urged. "'Tis you will be dead, not them, if you go on so."

They reached "Meavy Cot" and found Margaret. Her mother sat down, took off her bonnet and rested, while Madge stood a few minutes at the gate with Mr. Crocker before he started homeward.

"Try and cheer her up," he said. "'Tis that damned nonsense about the voice at Crazywell. She'll fret herself into her grave over it if this goes on."

They discussed the matter for a while; then Madge spoke of Bartley himself.

"Don't know what to be at," he said. "My life's stuck for the minute. I can't ask her again yet, and I'm not going till I have. Just once more. But the thing is to know what to be doing meantime—how to get a bit forwarder. How is she?"

"She's all right—silenter than ever to me though. Sometimes I think she's judging me rather hardly and don't reckon I'm a very good wife for David."

"I'm sure that can't be. She's a long way too sensible to imagine any such nonsense."

"She may be right, all the same. I don't know what it is; I wouldn't even name it to anybody but you and mother; but sometimes I feel as if there was a door between me and David, and sometimes he tries to open it, and I'm sure I'm always trying to, but it keeps shut."

"Stuff!" he repeated. "You're such a parcel of nerves, Madge—like poor Mrs. Stanbury. You mustn't let yourself think such things. David's wrapped up heart and soul in you, and if 'tisn't his way to show all he feels, that's only to say he's a Bowden. They are built on that fashion. You must try and look at life more with his eyes. He's a rare man and I envy him his tremendous power of sticking to a thing till he's got through with it. His ideas are big, not little; I can see that, and you ought to see it. You and me are a bit too much alike there, and 'tis our luck not to be rated at our real value in consequence. But we mustn't repay in the same coin. Because David don't quite understand you, and Rhoda don't understand me, we, who are nimbler-witted than them, mustn't be cross. They may not see the truth of us and all the virtues that we've got—and we've both got a rare lot in my opinion—but we do see

the truth of them, and so we must be patient with their characters."

It was a new light to the woman, and she perceived the wisdom under his jesting manner.

"If he'd only let me into his secrets!" she said.

"You must be content with mine," he answered. "David lets you into his good fortune and tells you when he's drawn a prize. But the bother and battle he keeps to himself."

"He doesn't," she answered. "I'd forgive that. But he tells Rhoda. Again and again I've known them to break off a subject when I came along—as if I was a baby."

"Try to think 'tis out of their kindness they do it."

"I have tried; but I know different. David don't believe in me—that's the bitterness of my life in a word, Bartley. He don't trust me like he trusts Rhoda."

"Then tell him so. Let him see what he's losing by keeping you out. And I believe, come to think of it, that might be good advice to myself too. With Rhoda, I mean. How would it be if I took a bit of counsel with her, Madge—asked her advice, like David does, and treated her like a man instead of a girl? Would that work?"

She considered.

"It would work, no doubt, as far as her being civil went. If you asked her questions, she'd answer 'em; and if you asked her opinion she'd give it. Whether 'twould lead to anything further, I can't tell. We've drifted apart a bit of late, and I see it clear enough without seeing the reason for it. However, I dare say I'm to blame too. No doubt I don't look at life from their point of view all I might. But I wish—I wish to God she'd take you—as much for my sake as her own."

The woman's unusual bitterness impressed him.

"Follow my advice and have a good talk with David. Thresh it out and open his eyes a bit. If you see from his point of view, as you will now, then 'tis but fair he should see from yours; and if he can't see your side single-handed, then you must help him. We'll meet again afore long and I'll tell you what comes of my new idea. Perhaps we shall both be lucky!"

He left her and she returned to her mother.

Mrs. Stanbury was absorbed in the dreadful new problems raised by Bartley Crocker's theory of the voice. She explained these complications to Margaret, and her daughter strove to comfort her without success.

CHAPTER V

END OF A ROMANCE

RHODA BOWDEN was walking over Yennadon Down, a broad tract of common above the gorges of Meavy. Great spaces stretched beneath her and a still higher and mightier wilderness heaved upward beyond the river and the forests to the east. There Ringmoor extended, and its lone miles basked in unclouded sunshine. Beneath lay Sheepstor and Meavy, each crowned by a church tower; while beyond rolled out long leagues of Devon to the margins of the sea. But Rhoda's eyes were on the ground and she moved with less than her usual steady purpose. An empty cartridge met her glance and some small grey object that fluttered in the mouth of it led her to stop and pick up the fragment. The cartridge was old and weather-worn; the live creature that had found this convenient receptacle was a large and dusky moth. For a moment Rhoda felt interested, then, perceiving that this insect had laid many eggs within the empty cartridge, she shuddered slightly and flung the moth and its nursery away; because maternity on such a scale seemed loathsome to her even in an insect.

She was on her way to Buckland of the Monks with a message from David, and she welcomed the long and lonely day promised by this task, for not a few matters lay heavy on her mind. Rhoda's responsibilities were growing beyond power of control.

But the anticipated hours of reflection were largely curtailed, for when she returned to the highway nigh Dousland Barn, a light cart overtook her and the driver was Simon Snell. His face indicated the most profound surprise. He smiled, hesitated, gave her "good morning," proceeded on his way, then changed his mind again, pulled up and alighted.

"What a terrible coorious thing as me and you should both be bound out along like this—on the very same day too!" he said.

"So 'tis then, and I hope you're well. Us haven't met this longful time."

"I was coming over one Sunday this summer," he declared; "but now will do just so well. I be going out

to Vartuous Lady Mine to spend the day along with my brother James and his wife. You might not have heard me tell much about him, perhaps? I've took a day off—by permission, of course—and I'm carrying 'em a gift, because they'm not very well-to-do, I'm sorry to say."

"I'm going to Buckland Monachorum for David."

"Well, I never! What could have falled out better? I very nearly drove by you; because I said to myself, 'Perhaps it might be too pushing in me to offer to give her a lift.' But I'm very glad I didn't, and I hope you'll accept of a seat till I leave your road. 'Tis a fainty sort of day, with thunder offering, in my opinion."

"Thank you. I should be very glad if you've got room."

"Room enough. I'm taking my brother half a pig as we killed last week, and his wife a bunch of they white Mary lilies, what grow to a miracle in our garden. People stop and stare at 'em. And if you'll sit alongside me—if it isn't making too bold——"

She ascended and they proceeded together.

"There'll be a thunderstorm afore long, as you say," she remarked.

"I quite agree. And how be you faring? You'm looking purty middling; and I be purty middling, and so's my mother, thank God, though she was into her seventy-fourth year last month."

"I'm all right."

"I ban't too close to you, I hope?"

She shook her head. She felt comfortable and easy with him, as usual, but her heart beat no quicker for his voice or the inquiring gaze of his great mild eyes.

"My brother was married afore I comed acquainted with you. He's a gamekeeper and his wife has a child every second year. For my part I think they're unlucky; but their way is to trust the Lord to look after the childer. But I'm not sure. By the same token you might not know that you've got another nephew. Your sister, Mrs. Screech, had a son yesterday betwixt six and seven of the evening. Screech comed in to smoke a pipe when 'twas all over. A very clever job, I hear, and the child to be called after your father."

"I don't want to know nothing about it, thank you."

"Beg pardon, I'm sure."

He was silenced for some time. Then he observed that Rhoda had a finger tied up.

"I do hope as you haven't hurt yourself," he said.

"Nothing at all. A dog bit through when he was playing."

"They will, and yet mean no harm."

She considered with herself whether this man could be of any use to her, and she decided that he could not. It was in any case almost impossible to state her difficulties. She found it hard to put them into words even in thought, where an idea, though it cannot live away from the symbols of words, yet develops without any coherent sentences and reasoned speech. To tell to another what was in her mind had as yet been beyond her power; and to mention the difficulty to Mr. Snell, even if possible, must have proved a futile task. Her instinct assured her that his mind was no more built to speak wisdom on sex questions than her own. She reflected thus, while he, employed upon a different matter, wondered vaguely if he might arrange another walk with her; whether it was worth while to do so; and whether, even if she accepted the invitation, he really desired such a thing.

Presently she uttered a generality which bore obliquely upon his own ideas.

"What a terrible difficult world it do seem to become, if you'm married! And even if you'm thrown much against married people, you can't escape it. If you care a lot about folk, you'm bound to feel for 'em, I suppose."

"I quite agree—never heard a truer word," he said. "'Tis the worst of being fond of people that, if they get in a mess, it makes you feel uncomfortable. You can't escape from that."

"The fewer we care about, the more peace we have, seemingly."

"Exactly so. I've thought that very thought, and I've often thanked God that, after my mother, and my brother, and my brother's wife, and one of my nephews, there's nobody in the world I should shed a tear for if they was took."

She nodded, and he suddenly perceived that this was one of the speeches wherein he had failed of perfect tact. Yet to modify it needed some courage.

"I should say *one* other—*one* other, if I may make so bold," he added.

She did not answer and he considered before continuing. Then he decided that he could not leave the matter there. Yet he was cautious.

"You mustn't think the worse of me for it. I don't mean anything by it to cause you any uneasiness. But you're the one, Miss Rhoda. I should certainly be very vexed if anything happened to you."

"Thank you, I'm sure, Mr. Snell."

"Don't," he said. "These things don't merit thanks. I've never told a lie, and so I won't hold my reason back. I think a lot of your character: that's why I should be sorry if harm happened to you."

"We've understood each other very well, I believe."

"Very well indeed; and you've taught me a lot about the female sex. And, but for you, I don't suppose I should ever have knowed anything at all about them. I may tell you, owing to your large understanding, that I've often considered about the sense of marrying. But I'm sure I don't know.—When you look round—the heart sinks."

"Yes, it does."

Mr. Snell did look round, and the beautiful woman roused some faint, feeble flicker of his anæmic passion.

"I grant you that the wedded state as shown by other people—and yet I won't go so far as Bartley Crocker do."

"How far's that then?"

"Mind, don't you say it against him. I've no wish to be thought a tale-bearer. But, in open speech, at the bar of Shillabeer's public-house, he said that though you hear of happy marriages, you never see them. Now that's too far-reaching—eh?"

"Not much. He's not far out, I reckon."

"Well, you know better than me; but, begging pardon for mentioning her again, your own sister is as happy as a bird. And I really don't say it's impossible to be happy with a home of your own."

"The right ones never meet. I'd warn every man and woman against it for my part."

With this speech Rhoda quite extinguished the paltry flicker in Mr. Snell's broad bosom. He looked rather frightened. He stroked his beard. At heart he felt a sort of relief that even the shadow of disquiet was now banished in the light of her plain statement.

"If that's your opinion, 'tis no part for a common man like me to say a word against it," he answered. "Sometimes—I won't deny it—I've thought, in uplifted moments, that the married state with such a meek nature as mine—and then again, however——"

"I speak what I know; but nobody can be sure they're right, I suppose. What do you think about it?" asked Rhoda. But why she gave him this loophole she knew not. Her interest in Mr. Snell was at a low ebb to-day, and her own thoughts filled her spirit to the exclusion of all else. Still she was always content with him. He appeared to her to be a sensible and responsible man whose opinion was better worth having than that of most people.

"Now you ask a poser," declared Simon, "for my own opinion on such a high subject be very unsettled. In fact, I'd a long ways sooner go by yours, and if you, of all females, feel as marriage be too doubtful in the upshot, then I'd so soon, if not sooner, take your word for it. And I may say that I will. There's nothing so restful as having your mind made up for you by a better one. And I can't say the men I know—they'm all for it in a general way—bring up very strong arguments. There's Amos Prouse tokened now, and he goes about properly terrified, so far as I can see; and there's Mattacott, from being an even-tempered man, turned so sour as a sloe, because Jane West keeps him on the tenterhooks. To keep company is certainly a very bad state; and you can't be married without going through it; so that's another reason against."

"I shall never marry," she said.

"Then no more shan't I," he declared. "And 'tis a troublesome weight off the mind to hear you say that."

"Better not go by me, however."

"'Tis just you and no other I would go by. Because—well, now since you've spoken and never been known to go from your word—the coast be clear for me and I feel so light as a lark in the air. If you'd said as you were for it, then my manhood would have—well, God knows what might have overtook me; for at such times a man gets into a raging fever and be ready to fight creation for the female, as the savage beasts do. But you've said it; and I quite agree. I know you'm right, and I say ditto to it. And we'll see t'others dashing into it, but 'twill be naught to us."

"It looks to me as if the useful people be often the single ones," she said.

"There again! What good sense. 'Tis the very height of sense! And Paul's our side too. Better to marry than to burn, he says in his large wisdom. But better not to marry if you'm perfectly cool and contented, same as what I be, year in, year out."

She did not answer and he spoke again.

"Still, mind this. If it had been otherwise with you, it would have been otherwise with me. Never was a manlier man in his instincts of self-preservation than me, as my mother will tell you. And if by chance I'd fallen upon a creature of the female sex as appeared to be looking to me to share life with her, then I doubt it might have happened. But not now. If she comed along now it would be too late. Because I've had walks along with

you in my time, and we've been terrible close, and we've understood each other as well as any two people could."

"I suppose we have."

"I tell you this, because you've given your word you ain't going to marry," he concluded; and nothing more was said until they reached a lane that broke from the main road. Then Mr. Snell pulled up.

"Here's my way. You must get down now. You go straight on. I shall be back after eight o'clock, and will bide here till a quarter past if I can help you home."

"No. I'll be back long afore that, I hope."

So the lifeless, bloodless abortion of a romance passed stillborn from between them, unregretted by either. They often met in after life, and they were always friendly within their natural limitations; but marriage never again rose as the most dim possibility on the horizon of the man.

He permitted her to alight without assistance. They talked a while longer before separating, and conversation drifted to David and his wife.

"I hear the people air their opinions and I say nothing —that being the way of least trouble seemingly," declared Mr. Snell. "But certainly now and again very outrageous speeches be spoke. Take Screech, for instance. He's no fool, Screech isn't. But he have a very coarse way of putting things, to my mind. His wife—begging pardon for mentioning her—was saying something about her brother David. I've forgot what it was, except that it weren't flattering, and Screech, he ups and says, 'Them two'—meaning David and Mrs. Bowden—'them two,' he says, 'be like a moulting cock and hen—that down on their luck, and all about naught, for the man's prospering and getting home the money with both fists.' 'Twas a vulgar thing to say, and I went so far as to tell him so."

"You might have told him he was a liar too," said Rhoda. "When did anybody ever see David down on his luck, even if he was? He don't carry his heart in his hand. A cheerful and a steadfast man always and if my sister-in-law be not cheerful nor steadfast—that's another matter, and the fault's not David's. I tell you this because you've got sense and was never known to make mischief."

"And never shall, please God!"

"What does an evil thing like Screech know about David?"

"Naught—less than naught. He allowed that, for in my cautious way, I went so far as to ax for chapter and verse, when he said your brother and his wife weren't happy. 'I don't know nothing about 'em and don't want

to,' he said in his coarse style; 'but a good few eyes be open round these parts, and 'tis very well marked they go different roads when out of sight of each other.' It might become you to mention it, or it might not. You know best, living along with them."

Rhoda hesitated but said nothing. The inclination to confide in Mr. Snell was not revived.

"Thank you for telling me. But whether I'll name it——"

"Don't mention me if you do," said Mr. Snell. "'Tis only to you I'd have said as much as I have said—out of respect to the family. And now I must be going on."

They shook hands and parted. He returned to his cart and, the lane leading up a hill, went slowly forward. His horse sagged at his collar and the thill chains clanked. With each step forward Simon's body jolted on the board. One leg of the quartered pig also waved spasmodically, and the candid lilies powdered their purity with golden pollen.

Thus it came about that Snell left the woman's thoughts where he found them. She tramped forward full of the matter of Margaret; she did her business; ate some bread and butter and drank some milk; started for home again. But, returning by way of Horrabridge, she was detained awhile and she did not ascend a steep hill out of Walkhampton on her return journey until the evening. Her brother, who had gone to Okehampton, was combining business and pleasure in a ride across Dartmoor. He would not come back until late, and it was understood that Rhoda herself might not be expected home before him. She, however, pursued her direct way under the acclivities of Black Tor while yet it was light, and looking down into the valley, the raw blue patch of the roof of "Meavy Cot," stared up a mile distant and smoke surmounted it. At nearer approach Rhoda saw Madge and a man come out of the cottage. They went off in the direction of Coombeshead and they walked close together and talked very earnestly. She altered her way somewhat, to get nearer to them, and was able to make sure of Margaret's companion. At first she trusted that he had been her brother, Bart; but it was Mr. Crocker with whom Madge proceeded and with whom she kept such close converse.

Rhoda went back, took the key of the door from a secret hiding-place, where it was always hidden for the first homecomer, and entered the cottage. A litter of tea-things stood on the table and Bartley had evidently partaken of that meal.

And on the road to Coombeshead Farm David's wife and David's friend were talking with profound interest—not of Rhoda and not of David—but concerning Constance Stanbury. That day, early after noon, Crocker had met Madge's father in trouble and had taken a message to the doctor for him, that he might the quicker return to his wife. Mrs. Stanbury had quite succumbed to her nerves again and was suffering much terror and horror through the hours of night. Her agitation culminated in what Mr. Stanbury held to be "a fit," and he felt that the unfortunate, haunted woman again needed medical care to help her fight these superstitious fears.

Mr. Crocker gladly conveyed an urgent message to the physician, and soon afterwards he walked to "Meavy Cot," that he might tell Madge. To his satisfaction he found her alone, accepted her invitation, drank tea with her, and then accompanied her to learn how her mother fared.

Now they talked of this curse that had fallen upon the old woman's life, and Crocker tried hard to conceive some possible way of relief. The truth was hidden from them and he did not for an instant suspect it; but the thought and care of both were entirely centred upon this subject, and for a time every other interest remained in abeyance while they strove to hit on some device by which Mrs. Stanbury might be comforted. Bartley suggested a visit from Mr. Merle; and Madge declared such an idea to be quite vain.

But Rhoda Bowden knew nothing of these facts. It was not until night, when Margaret returned and David also came home, that she heard the truth from her sister-in-law. And her inclination was to disbelieve at least a part of it.

CHAPTER VI

VIRGO—LIBRA

A MOON at full rolled hugely up over the Moor edge, outlined a black peat wall and by chance made a brilliant background for an atom of life that was there. Here Rhoda's kitten rested on an August night after great hunting of moths; and the planet threw a golden frame around it.

Rhoda herself, sitting alone at hand in the presence of her mistress, the moon, perceived this accidental conjunction and noticed her little pet dark against the immensity of the bright dead world now ascending. Rhoda sat with her hands folded in her lap and watched the red-gold rise. The moon and the kitten, for some subtle reason, alike comforted her. One rose clear of the horizon, and the other vanished. The work of the first was to diffuse a warm and wondrous stain upon the cloudless air; to permeate the earth's atmosphere with fleeting radiance and then, swimming upwards, to cool the passing heat of ruddy colour she had created and to supersede this glow with a pale rain of silver-grey light. It poured down into the silence and spread pools and patches of misty pearl upon the ebony of the waste. The work of the second was to come to Rhoda, stick up its little tail, pad in her lap, purr with infant heartiness, and, lifting its nose, mirror the moon in a pair of phosphorescent green eyes. So from both she won good and had sense to see that the stars in heaven and the beasts of earth might each minister after their fashion to such a soul as hers. They soothed her; but they did not advance her reflections or help to solve the gathering difficulties that conscience cast into her path. She was troubled and knew not where to turn. She stated the situation again and again to herself, but no light fell upon the picture from anywhere. Her belief was that her brother's wife saw far too much of another man. That the man in question wanted to marry Rhoda herself was an added complication; and from that fact, she judged that Margaret must be fonder of Bartley Crocker than he could be of her. Her mind was not constituted to weigh very subtly the shades and half shades of this situation, or appraise the extent of its danger. She concerned herself

with David and busied her spirit to consider only her duty towards him. Indifference toward Margaret of late tightened into dislike. Secretly she had always felt impatient with the other's softness; but since that softness began to lead David's wife astray, she became alarmed and angered. She retraced the general attitude of her brother and could see nothing in it at all unreasonable. He was very busy, very hard-working, very ambitious. He treated Margaret much as Elias Bowden treated his wife; and Rhoda believed that her mother was always happy and contented. But it could not be said that David's wife was particularly happy. Rhoda often broke upon her, when entering the house suddenly, and at such times Margaret would put on cheerfulness in haste, as a surprised bather might put on a garment.

What then was this woman to do? She had a high sense of duty and that sense had now begun to torment her. It was impossible to formulate any charge against Crocker or against Margaret. Yet she blamed the man not a little, for she believed that he ought to know better than seek the society of Margaret so frequently. Again justice reminded her that Madge made no secret of the meetings. Some, indeed, she might have had—perhaps many—which were never reported; but of others (and others which Rhoda had not seen) she spoke freely afterwards; and she often asked David if she might invite Bartley to "Meavy Cot."

Rhoda remembered that Bartley and her sister-in-law had been children together and that they had known each other all their lives. Herein was comfort, but reflection dashed it. At one time most certainly they had not felt the mere close friendship of brother and sister; for it was an open secret that Crocker had asked Margaret to be his wife within a few days of David's engagement. But the thinker did not permit this view long to discomfort her. She strove with native resolution to look at the position in a clear and reasonable light. David himself had said that Bartley and Margaret were like brother and sister. He exhibited not a shadow of uneasiness; and if he felt no concern, why should she do so? This argument, however, broke down; because Rhoda knew much more than David. He went about his business and it absorbed him. Margaret was always at home to welcome him; everything was waiting as he wished it; his whispered word was law, and his wife anticipated his very thought and remembered chance utterances and desires in a way that often surprised and gratified him. Rhoda

could not blame Margaret's attitude to David, and she could not for an instant blame David in the amount of time and consideration he devoted to his wife. Upon her estimate it seemed ample and generous.

She considered the brother and sister theory of Bartley's friendship with Margaret and resolved to cleave thereto with all her strength. She reminded herself of what she felt for David; she was very fair; she perceived that even as she and David thought and felt alike, with such mysterious parity of instinct and judgment that they often laughed when they simultaneously uttered the selfsame words, so Margaret and Bartley Crocker were certainly built on a similar pattern. They too looked at life through the same eyes; they too doubtless arrived at similar conclusions. The side issue of this man's regard for herself recurred in the weft of Rhoda's thought: but she drew it out. That relation was beyond the present problem and did not influence her decision. She had twice dismissed the man, and doubtless her second refusal would be taken by him as final.

She came to a conclusion with herself and decided to do nothing but watch. Such a task pained her to reflect upon; but there was none to whom she could speak, for she had none to be regarded in any light of close friendship but her brother. Her father, her mother, her elder sister were of no account. Therefore she determined to wait and watch as a duty to David. She hoped that a brief period of such work would bring peace back to her mind; and she went about it with a rising gorge, in doubt whether to be ashamed of herself or not.

But it happened, only two days later, that opportunity to modify this plan offered and David himself gave it to her. Thankfully she took it, and after a conversation to which he opened the way, Rhoda felt a happier woman than she had felt for many weeks.

He was mending some garden tools in his outhouse at dark and called for another candle. She carried it to him and stopped with him while he worked. The man was in a very good temper and happened to wax enthusiastic over his life and his wife.

"'Tis borne in upon me more and more, Rhoda, that I have better luck than I deserve. Me—such a stand-off chap—yet I'm always treated civil and respectful and taken as a serious and important sort of person. Sometimes, looking back, I can hardly believe it all. But I suppose 'tis my gert power of holding to work does it."

"'Tis because you'm a straight man and never known

to go from truth and honesty by a hair," she said. "People see that your word's your bond, and that you set truth higher than gain. You deserve all you get or ever will get—and more."

"Like you to say it; and well you know that my good is your good, Rhoda."

Then he praised his wife. His admiration was genuine but mechanical.

"What with you and her—Margaret, I've got a lot more than falls to most. Needn't say naught about you: we're one; but she's different. She can't see so deep and far off as we do; but she can feel more; and she trusts me; and I'm proud of the simplicity of her. Never wants no figures nor nothing. Never asks no questions. Leaves her life in my hands as trusting as the dogs are with you. And ever thinking for me. I said a bit ago as I dearly loved cold rabbit pie, made after mother's way. Well, the pie to-night was like the Ditsworthy pies. I thought for sure 'twas a present from home; but not a bit of it. She went up-along two days ago and larned the trick of it. If only—but 'twould be mean in me even to name it with such a woman——"

"If only what? All the same, I know. There's compensations against childer, David. Leave that and go on feeling grateful for her goodness; and—and wake up to a bit more too."

She spoke suddenly and with no little feeling. An inspiration had come to her—a brilliant thought greater and finer far than her recent solitary imaginings under the moon.

"'Wake up'!" he exclaimed. "Whatever do you mean, Rhoda? If I'm not wide awake, who is?"

Her ideas struggled within her. She strove to say the right thing, yet almost despaired. He waited during her silence, then spoke again.

"Don't think I'm not grateful to God for such a good wife. I love her more than she knows, or ever will know. I'm even down about her sometimes, when I think she don't know. Yet what more can I do? If there's anything, 'tis your bounden duty to tell me."

He made the way clear; yet she felt a doubt that if she did speak, he might take it ill. She was frightened—an emotion so rare that she did not recognize it and feared that some physical evil must be threatening her.

"I saw Simon Snell not long since," she said. "Didn't mention it at the time, for 'twasn't interesting, except to me; but I will now. He gave me a lift on my way to Buckland and said a good few very sensible things, as his

manner is. He told me of a saying he heard made by that Screech that married Dorcas. Screech was speaking of you and your wife, and he said you was like a moulting cock and hen sometimes—both down on your luck and didn't know what was the matter."

David laughed.

"So much for that then. I'll tell you how that happened. I fell in with the man—we're friends of a sort now—and chanced to talk of children. I may have just hinted I was sorry to be without 'em. But that was all. He's jealous of me as a matter of fact. He's getting on pretty well too; but he don't get on as quick as me; and he's handicapped by his mother and his children."

"He spoke of Margaret too, however."

"What he may have heard her say I can't guess. Naught against her home, that I will swear. Of course, 'tis only human nature to have our up and down moments."

"No doubt that spiteful woman—Dorcas, I mean—would be quick to make mischief if 'twas in her power," declared Rhoda.

"It isn't. There's no power on God's earth powerful enough to make mischief between me and Madge."

"Then look after her closer," said his sister.

It was out and she expected a shower of exclamations and questions. But they did not come. David dropped a hammer, stood up and replied. He had not wholly understood.

"I will," he answered. "I'll think this very night how to give her a bit of a treat. 'Tis natural, without a cradle in the house, she's moped. Us must make it up to her a little, Rhoda. Such towsers for work as you and me forget sometimes that some natures call for a little play as well. I'll look closer after her pleasure and such like. We'll go to Tavistock revel. I hadn't thought to do it; but we'll all take a whole holiday and not do a stroke of work for the day. At least no more than we'm bound to do."

"I mean all the time, David, not just for a day."

"Fancy your saying this to me! And now I'll surprise you too. You ban't the first who has talked like this. Crocker did the very same a bit ago, and I took it as kind in him, for I'm that sort of man. I'm not a jealous chap—too sensible for that. But if 'twas known what I felt for Madge, I dare say people, that see me so busy and wrapped up in getting on, might wonder. Even you don't quite see it, Rhoda. Still, this I will say: I blame myself as I did before. I'm not one to think I'm always right; and

love should out, not lie asleep in the heart. 'Tis naught unless you see it and let it work all the time, as you say."

"Don't for God's sake, talk like that," she begged earnestly. "Who am I to lecture you? What do I know of love? What do I want to know of it? I only care for you and your good, else I wouldn't have said this much."

She was thinking more of what he had just spoken than what she herself was saying. Bartley Crocker had taken her brother to task on this identical theme! She gasped with secret amazement at such extraordinary news. Doubtless this meant that Crocker and Margaret—— Here she barred her own thoughts. She refused to examine what such a fact could mean.

Her brother made an end of his work.

"Now I'm going in to have a tell with Madge," he said. "You come too."

But Rhoda refused.

"I'm for a walk. 'Tis a fair night."

They parted; he returned to his house; she loosed two dogs and went off on to the Moor.

David lighted his pipe and sat by the fire. Margaret was working at the table. For a time he kept silence, and then she spoke.

"What are you thinking on, dear heart? I hope all be going well at Tavistock?"

"I wasn't troubling about Tavistock," he answered. "I was thinking what a wonder you be, and how you spoil me, and how I'm not worth it—such a man as me."

"David!"

"To think as you went to Ditsworthy about rabbit pies! 'Tis things like that make me wonder."

Her face shone and she set down her work and came to him.

"'Twas naught; but 'tis lovely to know you marked it and was pleased," she said.

"I don't mark enough," he answered. "I'm that set on driving ahead, and making a bit of a splash, and getting up in the world for you—for you, Madge,—that I forget here and there. Don't gainsay me. Too well I know it in my leisure moments."

"You shan't say so. 'Tis all along of me being so small-minded and not looking on ahead like you do, but living in the stupid everyday things. I know they don't matter; and I know what you feel to me; and 'tis for me to see things with your eyes, not for you to see 'em with mine."

"'Tis for me to set higher store by the everyday things,"

he declared. "'Tis for me to value better the home you keep always sweet and ready for me; and the food you cook, and the hundred little odd worries and bothers many married men have to face, but me never. You don't bring no trouble to me; but you'm always ready and willing to hear my troubles. I can't expect you to understand when I talk about figures and such like. Such things ban't your part. But you'm always ready with your bright eyes to be glad and rejoice when good comes; and 'tis for me to be glad and rejoice in lesser things when you tell me about 'em. I don't let you know how clever I think you. And you always hold yourself so cheap that 'tis my duty to lift you up in your own conceit, for if you thought half so well of yourself as I think of you, you'd be the proudest woman in England, Madge."

She sat on his lap and put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"'Tis like life to me to hear you say such things," she answered. "Though too well I know how little I deserve 'em. I wish I was a better, cleverer sort to lend a hand with high matters like figures and work and sheep. But I'm only useful here."

"Us will each stick to our own share of the load," he said. "We'm both doing our part pretty well, I believe; and so long as you never forget that I mark your cleverness and love you better every day of your life, the rest don't matter. I've been a thought too buried in my own hopes of late, and I own it and I'm sorry for it. But my eyes was opened half an hour agone, and I want you to forgive me, Madge. 'Twas only seeming, mind you; but I doubt it looked real and it's made you down-daunted, as well it may have; and I'm truly sorry for it."

"You've a deal more to forgive than me. Many men would fling it in my face every day of my life as I brought 'em no family."

"I'm not that sort, and I'm hopeful in that matter as in every other. Put that out of your mind, same as I do. Man plants, but God gives the increase. I've found out—all my life so far—that, if we do our part, He's very willing to do His. And if He holds back—that's His business and not for His creatures to fall foul of. Who knows best?"

She tightened her arms round him and her tears flowed.

"Doan't 'e cry," he said, "unless 'tis for happiness. And I'll speak yet further, Madge, since I'm confessing my sins to-night. There's another that must have credit for this useful talk betwixt me and you."

Her thoughts leapt to Bartley Crocker; but she did not speak.

"I was saying to Rhoda a minute ago in the shed, that 'twas just like you to go up to Ditsworthy for the secret of mother's rabbit pies. And then she—Rhoda, I mean—told me a thing or two I ought to have found out for myself."

"I know right well Rhoda loves me dearly. What ever——" began his wife; then she broke off.

"Of course—like every other mortal. And she's a woman, and soft too—though not like you. She's content with me as I am, but you're not; and there's no reason why you should be. You're right to ask for a bit of worship from me; and the hard thing is you should have to ask."

"I never—never did, David. I was content too—always content, and proud of you always."

"I know. You didn't ask with your lips. But maybe you asked another way; and I didn't see the question till—till others in the past, and again to-day, put it afore me. I'm a contrite man. I'm——"

She put her hand over his mouth.

"You're a million times too fine and great for me. And I won't hear another word. There ban't a happier she on Dartmoor this minute than me!"

"Look here," he said. "I'll tell you what: we'll have a lark next week. There's a revel to Tavistock and we'll all go—you and Rhoda and me. Would you like it?"

"Dearly, and—d'you think, David, that we might ax Bartley Crocker to come? For his own sake and for Rhoda's?"

"Ax him an' welcome. But I'm afraid 'tis all up. She's actually against him now, I should judge, and at best she merely kept an open mind. She never cared a straw about the man, and never will. I'm sorry for him, because he's very fond of her; but I'm not sorry for her."

"I am. Any woman with a good husband must be sorry for them who haven't got one."

"But 'tis no use thinking about it. She'll die an old maid unless something very different from Crocker comes along. I met poor Snell but yesterday and asked him how the world wagged with him. And he said as he saw his way clearer than ever he had owing to a talk with Rhoda. Rhoda of all people! 'Glad you see what a sensible woman she is,' I told him, and he swore held always seen it, but never more than when she told the risks of marriage were greater than the gains. 'I'm off it for evermore,' he says; 'and so be she—I've got her word.' Never a man was more relieved in his mind, I should reckon."

"Nonsense!" declared Margaret. "She's young for her years, and maidens all talk like that. I won't believe it yet awhile. I won't even believe that Bartley's not the man. I see a lot of him and none knows him better. He's gained a deal of sense and patience of late. He's a kind-hearted, gentle creature, and she'd soon wake up to know what happiness really meant if she'd take him."

"She's happy enough in her own way."

"I hope 'tis so; yet how can such a lone life be happy?"

"The heron be so happy as the starling," said David; "though one's his own company most times and t'other goes in flocks. She needn't trouble you. However, since you still think it may be, I'll forget a thing here and there and help you, though 'tis against my own wish in a way. Of course Rhoda's good is as much to me as my good have always been to her. I want her to be a happy woman and a married woman too, if Mr. Right comes along. But all the same, I can't think whatever I should do if Bartley Crocker was to win her and take her off to Canada."

"The thing is to make her happy," answered his wife. "Before all else I want to do it. We're as happy as birds. 'Tis for us, one way or another way, to fill her cup fuller."

"We'll do what we may," he replied. "At least be sure that no man nor woman cares for her more than we do."

"And poor Bartley—don't leave him out. He mustn't be left out," she said.

His mind for the moment was on another issue.

"I'll grant in one particular she's not too happy," he remarked suddenly. "And that's over Dorcas. I'm not speaking a word for Dorcas. She behaved very badly and she's very well out of it, with a lot more luck than she deserves. Screech isn't what I thought him, and I've admitted I was wrong in my opinion of him; but Rhoda can't pardon her. I'm feared to say much, though she knows, for that matter, that I go so far as to nod to Dorcas now, and give her 'good morning' or 'good night' when we meet. But Rhoda won't budge an inch. I suppose 'tis out of our power, Madge, to soften her a little bit in that quarter?"

"I've tried full often; but I'll gladly try again," she answered. "And you're right and put your finger on the sore place, no doubt. You can see so deep into people, David. For certain 'tis being out with her own flesh and blood that makes Rhoda wisht and mournful. But we'll try yet again to bring 'em together. I know 'tis a great thorn in Dorcas, though she pretends not to care about it."

CHAPTER VII

A SHARP TONGUE

TIMOTHY MATTACOTT and his life-long friend, Ernest Maunder, walked and talked together. The latter was on duty, but since the way led over an open space skirted with wild and empty land, the constable relaxed his official manner and gave ear to Mattacott.

"I ban't too easy," confessed the elder man; "for it's rumoured that along of that silly business on Christmas Eve, when Screech hollered out Stanbury's name in the fog to Crazywell, and the wrong people heard him, that Mrs. Stanbury's going out of her mind. Something ought to be done."

"Something certainly ought to be done," admitted Maunder. "You couldn't say strictly that it comes under the head of law, else I should take steps; but we must consider of it before the woman gets worse."

"I don't want to anger Screech, for he took a lot of trouble, and 'twasn't his fault that Jane didn't hear the voice. For that matter, 'twas as good as if she had done, and she's holding off even now from Bart Stanbury, as Screech foretold me she would do. But I don't get no forwarder with her, and 'tis only an evil postponed from my point of view, because she's plainly told me that she likes Bart better than me, and she's only waiting to see if there was anything in that voice, or if 'twas all nonsense and stuff."

"In other words," said Mr. Maunder, "if the man lives over into next year, which, of course, he will do, then she'll take him."

"Yes, exactly so. If he died, she'd have me, but on no other terms."

"I'm afraid then, to say it kindly, Tim, the game's up," declared Ernest. "You see, the man ban't going to die, and you'm harrying his mother silly for naught. If I may venture to advise, I'd urge for you to let it out and give her up."

"I don't mind for myself, but there's Billy Screech."

"If you've lost her, 'tis no good keeping up these hookem-snivey doings. Naught's gained by it. To use craft, though foreign to my nature, I hope, in a general way, I should

advise that Screech lets the thing out sudden. He might pretend that he's just heard tell about it, and his wife could tell Mrs. Stanbury's daughter, Margaret Bowden. Then 'twould be all right in a day, and the poor creature might recover her senses and rest in peace."

"As 'tis," explained Timothy, "she's in a double mess, which we never thought upon—no, not the cleverest among us—for she can't tell whether 'tis her son or her husband be going to drop. And she goes in fear according."

"It oughtn't to be. It mustn't be," declared the other. "'Tis unworthy and improper; and though I couldn't say 'twas an actual crime against law, yet 'tis a very indecent situation, and if the poor creature was to go mad, you'd feel a heavy load on your conscience, Timothy, even though Billy Screech may be so built as not to care."

"Yes, I should," admitted Mr. Mattacott; "and something must be done—especially so, since I've lost the woman. 'Tis very vexatious in her, for she's as near as damn it said 'yes' a score of times."

"You'll do better to look elsewhere, whether or no. Them uncertain creatures afore marriage are often uncertain afterwards, and then they be the very mischief," said Ernest. "And as for wits, upon my life I don't think Mrs. Stanbury's the only one that's tottering. 'Twouldn't maze me any day to hear as Reuben Shillabeer had to be handled. That man's not what he was."

"He hath a wandering eye, I grant you."

"More than that, and worse than that. 'Tis my business, in its higher branches, to take thought of what be passing in a man's brain, Timothy, and oft of late I've marked the 'Dumpling' waver in his speech and break off and lose the thread."

"Have you now!"

"True as I'm here on duty. He don't fix his intellects as he used."

"He's always down—I grant that. 'The Corner House' ban't very lively nowadays."

"He is down, and that's a sign of a screw loose. Say naught, however, for 'twould be libel and land you in trouble; but mark me, the poor fellow changes from his old self, though never a cheerful creature since his wife went."

They overtook a woman and both saluted Rhoda Bowden. She had just crossed Lether Tor Bridge, and was proceeding by the road to Lowery. They talked concerning Mr. Shillabeer a while longer, and then Mr. Maunder mentioned Dorcas and her children. Whereupon from urbanity Rhoda

lapsed into silence, soon bade them good day, and turned off the main road into a lane. They passed on, and having left the track, Rhoda pursued the way she had chosen. It wound to her right, skirted a quarry on Lowery Tor, and returned to the main thoroughfare half a mile beyond. The detour was of no account, and yet, owing to this trivial incident, there happened presently an event that set rolling deep waves along the shore of chance.

The rough footpath led directly behind Mr. Billy Screech's cottage, and just as Rhoda was speeding by with her eyes turned from the place, the eldest child of Dorcas—a boy of more than three years old, fell headlong out of the hedge at her feet. The accident looked serious. For a moment her nephew lay motionless and silent, then he began to utter piercing screams and cry for his mother. The noise stilled Rhoda's alarm and brought Dorcas flying from her cottage, with her mother-in-law after her. When they arrived at the hedge Rhoda had picked up her sister's first-born, and was endeavouring to calm it.

The lesser William Screech was found to have escaped with no worse hurt than fright and bruises. He was soon in his mother's arms, and she handed him on to his grandmother. Dorcas thanked Rhoda and told the elder Mrs. Screech to depart; then the opportunity being a good one, she descended into the road herself, set her face, shook her red fringe out of her eyes, and resolutely overtook Rhoda, who had hastened forward.

"Stop, if you please," she said. "It's a free country and you've no right to deny speech to any civil-spoken creature. I want to speak to you, and I'll be obliged if you'll listen for a minute. You can't refuse to hear me."

Even at this moment Rhoda was struck by the calm authority in her younger sister's voice. She spoke as the superior woman, with all the weight of a husband, a family and a home behind her. The aggressive personality of Dorcas was something new.

"I don't want to have aught to do with you," said Rhoda.

"Nor I with you," answered the other. "But we've all got to do a lot of things we don't like in this world—you and me among the rest."

"Speak then," said the elder. She had not stood face to face with her sister for some years, and now she marked that Dorcas looked better far than of old. She had filled into neat matronly lines; her eyes were stronger; her gift of ready words was still with her.

"'Tis this: I'm weary of the scandal between us. I'm

looked up to and treated proper by other women, and 'tis a wonder to them all why you hold off as you do. I don't want your friendship, God knows, nor yet your good word; but civility I've a right to ask for, and 'tis a beastly, obstinate wickedness in you that refuses it. Here, but three days since, Madge comed in and said how hard she'd tried again to make you see different, but not a kindly thought to your own flesh and blood have you got. A minute agone, if you'd known 'twas my child you'd picked up, no doubt you'd have let the poor little toad drop again. And Madge says you won't make friends and be civil, even on the outside, out of respect to everybody; and I'll ask you why and thank you to tell me."

Rhoda lacked the usual armoury of women. Her mind moved slowly; her words did the like. She made no instant answer, but looked down into the angry eyes of Mrs. Screech and noticed her hands were wet and puffy.

"'Tis washing-day with you, I see," she said in a mechanical voice. Why she made this remark she had not the least idea. It was certainly not meant as an offence; but Dorcas held such irrelevance as rude.

"Never mind whether 'tis my washing-day or not. Please to answer me and give me a reason for what you'm doing year after year. I suppose you think 'tis terrible fine to stick your vartuous nose up in the air, and pretend you'm a holy saint and not a common woman. Terrible fine, no doubt—and terrible foolish—like many other terrible fine things be. Don't you judge your betters so free, and sneer at every woman who does her first duty in the world and helps the world along; but look at home a bit and see what a nasty-minded, foul-thinking creature you be, without enough charity to keep your brains sweet. You was very fond of ballyragging me in the old days, when I was a stupid girl and didn't know what I was born for; but you shan't come it over me no more, and I warn you not to try."

Her voice was shrill, and Rhoda, listening to the sound, perceived another whom marriage had made a shrew.

"What's the use of this noise?" she asked coldly. "You can't make me have aught to do with you or your children, and I refuse to do it. 'Tis playing with the past to ask the reason. You know the reason. I never would speak, and never will speak to any woman who does what you did. I'm jealous for women, and the like of you, that makes them a scorn and a laughing-stock, should be cast out by all right-minded females. Then such things as you did wouldn't be done no more."

"No! If the women were like you, there'd mighty soon be no more women—nor men neither—a poor, unfinished thing—like a frost-bitten carrot—good for naught. You to talk to me out of your empty life! You to say I'm not fit company for people—me as be bringing brave boys and girls into the world, while you look after puppies and lambs! Why, damn you, you be no more than a useless lump of flesh, as might so well be underground as here! You—out of your empty, silly life—to talk to me in my full, busy days! I spit at you; and if you think to punish me, then I'll punish you too. I can bite so well as bark; and if you ban't on your knees pretty soon, I'll have you and David by the ears—then we'll see what becomes of you!"

Mrs. Screech suggested a woman suffering under too much alcohol. But she was merely drunk with anger. Her sister's calm attitude and patient indifference to this attack did not help to soothe her. Rhoda looked at the sun, and Dorcas knew that she was judging the time of day.

"You'll call for the hours to move a bit faster afore long," she said. "Don't you think you can insult me and my husband, year 'pon year like this, and not smart for it. We know very well how to hit back, and if it hadn't been for a better woman than you, I'd have done it a long time ago. I don't forget how you boxed my ears once, because I knowed how to love a man. You'd have better axed me what the secret was and begged to know it. But you think you've got no use for a man; and they've got no use for you and never will have—as you'll live to find out. And I'll sting you to the quick now—now—this instant moment, if you don't say you'm sorry for the past and promise on your honour to treat me and mine decent in future. I warn you to mind afore you speak."

A malignant light shone over the face of Dorcas. She set her teeth and panted at her own great wrongs, while she waited for the other to speak.

"You can't hurt me," said Rhoda; "and you know it."

"Can't I? We'll see then! God defend the world from white virgins like you—that's what I say. A holy terror you are; and we're all to be brought up for judgment, I suppose—to have our heads chopped off, because we dare to be made of flesh and blood instead of dead earth. Pure and clean—is it? What *you* call pure. All the same, the likes of you does things, and thinks things, us married women would blush to do and think."

"If that's all you want to say, I'll thank you to get out of my road," answered the other.

"'Tisn't all, as it happens. I'm going to talk of Bartley Crocker now, and then you can take away something to think about yourself, you frozen wretch! I suppose, in your pride, you fancy he's after you all these days, and comes because he wants to marry you—wants to marry a lump of granite! 'Tisn't you he thinks about, or cares about, or ever will; 'tis one whose shoes you ban't worthy to black—or David either. Between you she'd be like to die of starvation, I reckon; and who shall blame her if she does take her hungry heart to somebody else? You and him—good God! 'tis like living between two ice images—enough to kill the nature in any creature higher than a dog. And she knows it, and a good few more—Bartley Crocker among the number—knows it. Belike Madge grows tired of being moss to his stone, and working her fingers raw for such as you and her husband. And even your precious David ban't the only man in the world. And so a decent chap like Bartley comes along, an old friend that knows a little about girls and what they feel like, and knows they be different from sheep and heifers. Hear that! 'Tis not for you the man seeks your house. He uses your name like a blind. He laughs at you and your airs and graces. He's got no use for you and never will have. They meet here and there and everywhere—and why not? 'Fallen woman' be the word for me, I suppose. 'Tis you be the fallen woman; and to call you woman is too good for you! You never was a woman; but Madge is, and I hope to God you'll wake one day to find she've had pluck and sense enough to leave you and David and run for it with a better man. You may stare your owl's eyes out of your head. But you've got it now, and you've earned it."

Dorcas stopped, panting from her tirade, and passed her sister and disappeared without more speech. Rhoda, left alone, stood quite still for a little while; then she proceeded on her business. Not a shadow of anger clouded her mind, only dreadful dismay at the things she had heard. She was not galled for herself; she did not wince at the foul torrent loosed upon her. It passed over her harmlessly. But her thoughts busied themselves entirely with David. That Dorcas should thus have supported her own fears and driven home her own cloudy suspicions and terrors, struck Rhoda dumb. Here was the thing that she had hidden and suffered to gnaw her breast without a sign, now shouted on the loud, vulgar tongue of the world, as represented by Dorcas. Here was the secret that she had suspected and searched out in fear and trembling, blurted coarsely for any ear.

A period of increased happiness had recently passed over "Meavy Cot," and Madge, who appeared to hide her emotions no more than a bird, went singing and cheerful through it. Then matters drifted into the old ways. Now much of hope deferred was upon David's mind and some abstraction and silence clouded the home again, for the Tavistock appointment remained still a matter of uncertainty. But the circumstance chiefly in Rhoda's thoughts at this moment was the attitude of her brother to Bartley Crocker.

Their relations had grown more and more friendly of late. Crocker often came uninvited to "Meavy Cot," and David always appeared well pleased to see him. When the younger was not by, her brother often spoke of him, and both he and Margaret endeavoured to make Rhoda share their high opinion. From Madge she had always turned impatiently away; but to David she had listened and not seldom wondered that he and she—who found themselves thinking alike in most questions of life and character—should differ so widely upon the subject of this man. The reason was now easy to discover: she knew the truth and her brother did not. Her judgment was confirmed. Then, upon this appalling conclusion, came doubt and deepest perplexity. Why should such a woman as Dorcas be right? Her evil heart might have invented the whole story with no purpose but to torture and torment. Rhoda had next reluctantly to consider Crocker himself and his bearing when they met.

If he was acting a lie, he was acting it well. He had made it clear half a hundred times, though without offering another formal proposal, that he would be rejoiced and thankful above measure if she threw in her lot with him, and married him, and accompanied him to Canada. She asked herself what would happen if she accepted him. Her thoughts grew more and more difficult. She reached the lowest depth of discomfort that life had shown her.

CHAPTER VIII

UNDER THE TREES

THERE is a lonely wood where Meavy hides upon her way and whence her waters cry like siren voices from copse and thicket and the darkness under great trees. Hither she passes, amid mossy stones and through secret places curtained by green things. At the feet of Lether Tor there rise forests of oak and beech ; and here, by day and night, through all times and seasons, two songs are mingling. The melodies change as the singers do ; but they never cease. In summer the shrunken river tinkles to the murmur of the leafy canopy above it, and her voices ascend fitfully to meet the whisper of the leaf and the sigh of the larch ; in winter the legions of the branch have vanished and naked woodland and swollen stream make wilder music. Then the trees lend their lyres to the north wind, and the rocks beneath utter strange cries that combine their choral measures with fierce throbbing of the forest harps above. The foliage fallen, Lether Tor's grey castles and jagged slopes are visible, lifted against the west and seen through a lattice of innumerable boughs. Behind this mountain sinks the sun, now in an orange-tawny aureole above the purple, and now wrapped with sullen, lifeless cloud ; now upon the clearness of summer twilights, and now through the flaming arms of a red mist.

To-day, in August, this haunt of Meavy was a nest of light and cool shadows dappled together, a tent of leaves —dark overhead, where the sky filled the fretwork of the tree-tops, and alive at the forest edge with a glory of gold, where sunshine poured through loops and ragged, feathered fringes of translucent foliage. The leaves formed a commonwealth of song and gladness and harmonious concessions. Each integral of the arboreal courts advanced the same beauty, lifted to the same zephyr, glittered to the same sun and moon, drank life from the same dew, trembled to the same threat of autumn and of death. Beneath, through rifts in the bosom of the wood, the blue-green brake-fern shone and panted out her fragrance on the hillside. A colour contrast very vivid was thus offered through the frames of the forest ; and beyond this region of rock-

strewn fern, there spread a haze of light and darkness —of indigo and silver blended about the shaggy knees of Lether Tor where it lifted to the sky.

Through the midst of the dingle under shadows, yet with her breast bared to those amber shafts of sunshine that fell upon it, came Meavy, with many a curl and turn and leisurely dawdling in deep pool. Fern fronds, fingered with light, bent over the face of the water ; flesh-coloured flowers of agrimony rose above ; flash of golden rod and the seeding spires of foxgloves mingled there ; while a ripple of filched fire from the sun-shaft broke the glass of each smooth pool, and heaven's blue was also reflected from many a rift in the veil of the leaves. Bramble and woodrush spanned the stream and nodded, linked together with a spider's trembling web ; by broken, subterranean channels the river held her way ; light, sobered into half light where moss sponges soaked crystal water and golden sunshine together, penetrated through the heaviest shade ; darkness only dwelt in the deepest rifts and crannies and upon the black, submerged vegetation of the rocks. Out of these mysteries arose new songs and whispers, where the stream slid stealthily forth from her secret places and the hidden homes of unseen things that she also blessed and forgot not. Here the sun stars, catching upon her convex ripples, were reflected and thrown upward, to dance and flash unexpected brightness into gloom, or set wonderful radiance upon the under-face of leaves.

Life, in shape of bird and beast and fish, prospered here ; and glittering insects—ichneumons, that hung motionless like golden beads in some beam of light ; butterflies that came and went ; and long-legged spiders and great ants —likewise justified themselves. The trees were garlanded with ivy, polypody and many mosses, that hung in festoons and fell even to the dim, moist river-ways, where shy flowers blossomed in shade, and the filmy fern spread its small loveliness upon the stone.

Here, at the hour near summer twilight, when life ranges at full stress and passion before rest, one may see, in the low red light that pierces to each inviolate place, some vision of the shepherd god a-glowing ; and through the wail of insects, under the melody of ripple and frond, there steals sweet warbling of the syrinx at Pan's own puckered lips. Music full of the unfulfilled he plays—music fraught with world sorrow and world joy. Now it is mellow as the dying day, now tender and triumphant as the dawn ; but it is never satisfied ; it is never satisfying ; because it whispers of precious things felt but not known ; it hungers after the

ultimate mystery; it thirsts for the secrets behind the sunset.

At one spot in this wood a young beech leapt from a rock, and the earth cushion which supported it hung over the river. A little precipice fell beneath to water's edge, and the whole force of Meavy struck here and leapt on again crested with light. It was a human haunt and suited well a soul who went between sadness and fitful happiness, who declared herself reconciled and contented, yet knew that it was not so. Hither Margaret often came and found a temple of peace. She brought sorrow and doubt here; and sometimes the glen lifted it; and sometimes she departed again not happier than she came.

To-day she sat with her back to the beech; and two others shared these precincts with her. One reclined at her feet; the other watched unseen.

Prospects of important employment kept David Bowden much from home at this season. The matter was now as good as accomplished and it appeared certain that, with the new year, he would leave Dartmoor and enter the service of a cattle-breeder at Tavistock. Such a position opened possibilities far better than the man could have expected at his present work. With mingled feelings Margaret contemplated the change; and she met with Crocker on two or three occasions at this period during her husband's prolonged absence. She made no secret of these appointments, yet it came about that one most vitally interested did not always hear of them; because Rhoda had of late lapsed into a very saturnine vein and eschewed converse with her sister-in-law. Madge, therefore, judging that her affairs were of no consequence or interest to Rhoda, kept them to herself. They were at "Meavy Cot" alone together and, in all kindness, the wife had proposed that Rhoda should take this opportunity of David's absence and herself visit Ditsworthy for a day or two. Mrs. Bowden had expressed a desire to this effect and the opportunity seemed good. But Rhoda curtly refused. Her dogs might be trusty guardians for the hearth and home of "Meavy Cot"; but they could not guard the mistress of it or protect her from herself.

The other woman stopped therefore, and, the more suspicious for this invitation to depart, watched in secret.

She was watching now, while Margaret and Bartley, under the beech, sat close together and talked like kind-hearted children about the welfare of another person. He

had great information for her and promised to lift a sustained cloud of darkness from her mind.

"What'll you give me for the best piece of news you've heard this year?" he asked; and she replied that she had nothing in the world to give anybody but goodwill.

"If I could give you Rhoda, I would," she said; "but nobody can give her to you save herself."

"I've made a great discovery—or so good as made it," he answered. "'Twas out of Tim Mattacott of all people that I got a clue. Him and Maunder are well-meaning, harmless men, and in the bar—at Shillabeer's—three days ago—I heard them talking together. They were at my elbow and I couldn't help listening to a few words. After that I didn't blame myself for listening to a few more. It's all about your brother Bart and Jane West, and your mother."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Why there's been a plot, and I'm after the ringleader. I may or may not find him, but one thing is clear, and that's all that matters. Somebody—not Mattacott himself but a friend of his—has tried to help him to get Jane West away from Bart."

"It looks as if they had succeeded too," said Margaret; "for Bart tells me the girl won't say 'yes' and won't say 'no.'"

"There it is! 'Twas a deep idea to stop her once and for all. How d'you think? By letting her hear the Voice of Crazywell call out Bart's name! 'Twas planned very clever that she and Bart should actually hear it on Christmas Eve; and they would have done so, but for the fog that kept 'em to the road. Instead, as luck would have it, your mother, of all people, hears the Voice. And now, as far as I can gather, those in the secret—or some of them—hearing how she's taking on, begin to be a bit uneasy—as well they may."

"Oh, Bartley!"

"'Tis true; but we must go to work witty and catch the sinner himself. 'Sinner' I call him, yet that's too strong a word belike. All that really matters is for you to tell your mother 'twas nonsense, and that a man lay hid by the pool, and that 'twas never meant to fret her to fiddle-strings about it."

Margaret jumped to her feet.

"Sit down," he said. "Can't let you off like this before I've been here two minutes. We'll go up over to Coombeshead together presently. Must talk a bit first. An hour more or less won't make no difference to your mother."

She sat by him and put her hand on his arm. Then she bent and kissed his hand impulsively.

"You've paid me after all!" he laughed.

"I'd give you your heart's desire and the keys of heaven, if I could," she answered. "This is the best fortune that's come to me for many, many a long day; and I bless you for bringing it."

"Thought you'd be pleased. But tell 'em to say naught yet. I'm putting my mind into it, for I've got nothing to do now but twiddle my thumbs and wait till I can decently go to her—Rhoda—for the third and last time of asking. I doubt 'tis a vain thing, though. She likes me less and less, I believe."

"I hope not; but this I know: she likes me less and less."

"You!"

"Yes—for reasons I can't fathom. Either that, or she've got some deep matter on her mind that keeps her more than common silent. With David away the nights be cruel. Sometimes 'tis all I can do to help crying out and begging her, for pity, to open her mouth. I get off to bed so soon as I can; and so like as not, when I'm gone up, she'll go abroad again and keep out, Lord knows where, till long after midnight."

"I don't call it respectable," said Bartley, shaking his head with pretence of disapproval. "I really don't, Madge. I wish I could meet her on one of these moony walks. Perhaps she'd listen to reason then—if she didn't set her pack of dogs on me!"

"'Tis hard to live so close to a fellow-creature and understand her so little."

"I understand her well enough—if she'd only believe it," he said.

For a moment they lapsed into silence. Then he plucked a long grass-blade and began to tickle her ear. She shook her head and laughed. A bright thought came to her mind.

"I heard by letter from David this morning. The matter's settled. He'll be bailiff of the great breeding farm—everything under him—the actual head man under the master. I feel very proud about it, for it shows how high the people rate him."

"And well they may. You could trust him with the Bank of England. Never was such a dead straight, lofty-minded man in the world before."

"I like you to praise him. He thinks such a lot of you. He's even been at Rhoda about you too."

"What will she do if you go to Tavistock? I reckon 'tis the thought of that more than me, or anything else, is making her down on her luck."

"I was hopeful 'twould perhaps turn her more to you. She could never live in Tavistock."

"No," he said, "that's a certainty. She wants more room than a town can give her. You're right, Madge: this must make her think a bit more of me. Canada, or here, or the North Pole—'tis all one to me if she'll come. And if she says 'no' again, then I'm off alone—to the Dominion. Why I'm drawn that way I hardly know. But I am."

"Third time's lucky. How I hope it will be!"

"If she cared for me, even half as much as you do, I'd win her."

"If she knew what a rare good chap you are, you'd win her, or any woman."

"You're always too easy with me," he said. "Lucky you didn't marry me: you would have spoilt me utterly—not that there was much to spoil. Yet I dare say we should have jogged along very comfortable."

"Who knows? Perhaps none too well, Bartley."

"Perhaps not. We're too much alike," he declared.

"In many things we are."

"But the weak help the weak. You'll see a pair of bryony stems twirl round each other, and so do far better and go farther than ever they could single-handed."

"'Twould be the blind leading the blind—you and me together. The oak's more good to the ivy than anything soft like itself."

"Pity I haven't a bit of David's iron in me," he confessed.

"It is," she admitted. "A pity I haven't too."

"And a pity he haven't got a bit of my——"

She nodded strong assent.

"That's pity too," she said. "That's what I've wished many and many a time—just like a silly creature to wish what can't be. 'Tis worse than a child crying for the moon to want a man's nature changed."

"Yet half the people spend their time wanting the other half to change," he told her.

Again there was a pause and then he spoke.

"So long as it's well with you, I don't care."

"Well enough—if I could see it," she said.

"If you could see it!"

"I mean if I could feel it."

"If you don't feel it, then 'tisn't well."

"It can't be well because we've got no family. 'Tis

a grievance—and a just grievance. But yet 'tis well with me none the less, Bartley. The real way to be happy is never to look at home too much. Perhaps, better still, never to look at home at all. By 'home' I mean a person's own heart. Keep out of that and always be busy for other people. Then you haven't time to be miserable."

He shook his head.

"We've all got time for that; there's always the night," he answered. "Nature gives us the night-time for sleep, and life takes a big slice out of it for trouble."

"I ought to understand him by now. But 'tis the ups and downs I never can get used to," she explained. "My dear man will be a husband in a thousand now and again, and I'll thank God in my prayers and say to myself as he understands my poor feeble nature at last, and that we never shan't see a cloud again; then he's off and hidden away behind himself for months at a time, and I can't win a smile from him or hardly a good word."

"He's so ambitious."

"No doubt 'tis that. 'Twas Rhoda herself got him into his good way last time; and a right glad week we had of it. Then there came all this over his mind. Somehow he can't bring himself to ask my advice over anything bigger than his own clothes. He lets me choose them, bless him. That's something."

"And jolly smart he always looks. But mind this, Madge, you talk of ups and downs. That's no hardship —'tis the natural, healthy state, like the ebb of the river in summer drought and the seasons coming round one after the other. You can't have ups without downs, and if you want one you must brave the other."

"I don't want neither," she said. "I'd sooner far we kept at a steady jog-trot and got closer to each other every year we lived, and saw with the same eyes, and felt with one heart."

"Things balance out pretty fair. That sort be comfortable, but 'tis terrible tame work. If you don't fall out, you never make it up, and my experience of females is that almost the best part of the fun with 'em is making it up. They like it as much as we do too."

"Marriage is different."

"Naught keeps the air of marriage sweeter than a good healthy breeze now and again."

"You talk as one outside. You know nothing at all about it!"

"I'll kiss *you* in a minute—and not on the hand neither!" he laughed. "And 'twill be for punishment, not payment,

if you can say such hard things to me. No, I'm not married, worse luck; but you oughtn't to throw it in my face like that, for 'tis no fault of mine, I'm sure."

"I'd be happier than any woman ever was on Dartmoor, I do think, if she'd take you."

"You've done all you could—so's David. But there's no more in your power. If I can't rise to the skill to win her, then so much the worse for me."

"Come and do a kind thing," she said suddenly. "Come and explain to my dear mother this wonder you've found out. Nobody but you ever would have been so clever as to do it."

"And may I come home and have supper with you and Rhoda afterwards as a reward?"

"And welcome," she answered.

"There's a moon and everything. I wish to God she'd let me go out walking in the dark with her afterwards."

"Perhaps she might. She took walks with Mr. Snell."

"Not by moonlight? No—no, 'tis all waste of time and hope and sense. But, good Lord! if she's so frosty under the summer sun, what must she be in moonlight? Freezing cold enough to make a man's heart stand still!"

"Perhaps 'tis all the other way and the dark hours soften her," suggested Margaret.

They rose and she brushed his back, which was covered with scraps of leaf and moss.

Presently they moved away together towards Coombeshead; and then from her lair in a brake fifty yards distant, Rhoda departed to return home. Their speech had been entirely hidden from her, but their actions were all observed; and their actions, unlit by the spirit that informed them, left her soul dark.

Mr. Crocker, on second thoughts, decided that he would not sup at "Meavy Cot" until David came back, and Madge went her way alone after bringing large comfort and peace to Mrs. Stanbury. She was full of the incident when she came back to Rhoda, and gave her silent and sceptical listener the true account of the meeting by Meavy.

CHAPTER IX

DARKNESS AT "THE CORNER HOUSE"

AS time advanced even the least observant took note of an increasing gloom that hung over Reuben Shillabeer. It fluctuated but set steadily in upon him. He grew more silent and more fanatical where matters of religion formed the topic. He talked of giving up "The Corner House." He declared that had it been in his power, he would long since have emulated the bold Bendigo and preached to his fellow-men.

"I can't do that, along of having no flow of words," said Mr. Shillabeer, moodily. "Speech in the pulpit manner have been denied to me. All the same, I may have done more for the Lord than any of you men know about."

He addressed a Saturday night bar and reduced most of those who listened to an embarrassed silence.

"'Tis things like that we don't expect and have a right to object to in a public-house," declared Mr. Screech afterwards. "We come here for peace and quietness and a pint. At this rate the 'Dumpling' will very soon want to end the evening with a prayer meeting; and I for one shall be very glad when he goes and us get a cheerfuller pattern of publican there."

Many were of Billy's mind. Two potmen in succession left "The Corner House" owing to the depressed atmosphere of that establishment; the regular guests held serious meetings to discuss the situation. Some were for strong measures; others held the evil must soon cure itself.

"Either the poor soul will go melancholy mad and have to be taken from among us—and 'twill ask for half a dozen strong men to do it—or else the cloud will pass off," explained Mr. Moses. "Be it as 'twill, we can't go on like this. I advise that we wait till the turn of the year; and then, if nothing happens, we'll make a regular orderly deputation, with me and Mr. Bowden as ringleaders, and wait upon Sir Guy Flamank and explain to him that 'The Corner House' under Shillabeer isn't what it should be."

"'Twould be better far," Ernest Maunder had said, "if the man would be as good as his word and retire.

If we can urge him without unkindness to do so, he might get calmer and easier in his mind in private life."

"Not him," prophesied Screech. "Take the life and company and stir of the bar from him, and he'd become a drivelling old mump-head in six months. As 'tis, he may be seen half a dozen times in a week sitting on his wife's grave, when he ought to be to work in his house."

"Mr. Merle have said the same," admitted Charles Moses. "To me the man said it. 'I don't like to have poor Shillabeer in the churchyard so often,' was his word. 'Tisn't seemly for the people to observe him with his hand over his face and his hat off beside him sitting there. To display his grief in this manner, after nearly fifteen years, is not true to Nature, and I feel very alarmed about it.' That was what his reverence said to me; and I answered that he echoed my very thought."

"The man wants to be lifted to more wholesome ideas," declared Mr. Maunder. "Nobody can say of me that I'm against the Bible; but there's times and seasons—a time for everything and everything in its time—as the Book says itself, I believe; but he thrusts Scripture into conversation and peppers talk with texts till free speech be smothered. He ought to go—to say it without feeling."

And meantime the anti-social instinct in Shillabeer, filtering by secret ways through the old man's brain, took another turn and led him upon a road none had foreseen. Vaguely at first he glimpsed it, and on his declining years a dark short cut to peace suddenly yawned.

The first glimpse of this haunting evil that now crept upon the old prize-fighter was revealed to a woman; and on the occasion Mr. Shillabeer not only shocked her with a thought, but astonished her by a confession.

First, however, there came dark words between them, as happens at the meeting of unhappy and restless spirits. Then Margaret Bowden, for it was she, learnt the man's simple secret. It argued some unexpected cunning in him that he could have pursued his purpose and also hidden it; and the circumstance taken in conjunction with the present theme, made her fear for his sanity. Not the subject so much startled her as its existence in this particular man's brain. She listened, was surprised to find how reasonable his arguments seemed, yet strove with all her wits to refute them.

One day on his way back from Princetown Mr. Shillabeer noted the smoke rising from "Meavy Cot" under Black Tor. He had never seen David Bowden's home and the opportunity was a good one. He left the main road,

therefore, and soon reached the house. David happened to be away, and Rhoda was also out. But Margaret made the visitor welcome, hastened the hour of tea-drinking, and insisted that he should stop for it.

"As nice a house as one might wish for," he said. "And I'd like to say that I'm among them that wish all joy and good fortune and good luck to your husband. He's one of the fortunate ones, and well he deserves to be. I suppose it won't be long now afore he takes up the new work?"

"We go after the winter," she answered.

"A position of great trust. 'Tis wonderful to me to think that when I first come to Sheepstor he was a little fellow in a lamb's-wool coat, as wanted his mother's hand to help him over the rough ground. And I've lived to see him rise into manhood, and show his valour in the ring, and take a wife, and now stand up among leading people and rise to the right hand of one of the richest personages in the county."

"Very wonderful, as you say. Yet not wonderful neither. 'Tis David that is wonderful—not the things as happen to him. Given such a man, he was bound to get up top."

"True," declared Mr. Shillabeer, passing his cup to be refilled; "the very same thought often came in my mind when my wife was alive. She was the wonder, and I was sure to be lucky and fortunate when I married her. But death's stronger than the most wonderful life that ever was lived. She went and took her luck with her; and her gone, I sank again to be a common man. And when you feel puffed up, Margaret, always remember that death lies behind every hedge and makes ready the gun trigger for this man, the flood for that; the weak lynch-pin here, and the mad dog there. Another thing as you may have noticed: 'tis always the usefulest be picked off. Heaven's terrible jealous of a real valuable man. It ain't got no need of the rogues and wastrels no more than we have; but if a male or female be doing for the Lord with both hands, so often as not the Lord says 'That's the very man or woman I want for such and such a bit of real high work.' And they'm cut down like the grass of the field."

"Yes," she said. "The Lord harvests His own way, Mr. Shillabeer; and because a beautiful, useful life goes, ban't for us to mourn, but to say 'twas needed for higher things."

"And another point I'd have you to know," he added. "I ban't at all sure if the right of private judgment be withheld either. Parson will tell you, and most people

will also tell you, that 'tis a very bad come-along-of-it for a human creature to say 'I ban't wanted no more and so I'll be off;' but I won't go so far as that myself. I've tried to look at this matter with the eyes of God A'mighty, and I've done it."

She stared at him.

"You'm surprised," he said; "but listen to me. I'm a man of many troubles and griefs, and I hope you'll never see half a quarter the sorrows I have. Still as the sparks fly upwards, so you'll have your share and know what it is to suffer."

"Yes, for certain."

"But don't you ever suppose that we're put here for naught but suffering and naught but happiness. I tell you, Margaret, that suffering and happiness be both beside the great question."

"We're put here for usefulness," she said, and he eagerly agreed with her.

"The very word! Trouble or joy be an accident—always a matter of chance. You can see it everywhere. There's wise and sensible people wading through naught but trouble and opening their eyes on it at every sun up; and there's born fools sailing along in naught but fine weather; and so you get men like me full of doubt and darkness, because we can't trust our own wisdom; and fools such as—but I won't name no names—thinking themselves terrible clever and giving themselves terrible airs because they suppose their good be a matter of their own making, instead of simple kind fortune."

"I suppose things come out pretty fair all round in the long run," she said. "If you've got money, you miss childer; if you've got love you miss luck; if you've got health——"

"As to health, naught matters less than that," declared Mr. Shillabeer.

"You speak as one who never had an ache or pain," she said.

"Bah!" he answered, "this carcase be less to me than the bones the crows have plucked beside the way. I've reached a high pitch of mind now when I could drive a red-hot needle through the calf of my leg and care naught for the pang. D'you think these things matter to a man who have been hammered into a heap of bruised, senseless flesh four different times in his life like what I have? 'Tis the inner pain that hurts me, and if I was canker-bitten and racked with every human ill, I'd laugh at it all, if only my wife had been spared to sit beside me and

hold my hand. Things ban't fairly planned here. You say they are, but it isn't so. I know 'tis a common speech on easy tongues, but it won't stand the test of workaday life. Happy people may say it to calm their consciences if they be having an extra good life, but 'tisn't true, and never was true. Things ban't fair all round—nothing like it."

"No, they're not," she confessed. "'Tis just a foolish parrot speech. I know they're not fair as well as you do really."

"Then I go on to my argeyment," said Reuben. "Granted the Lord, for His own secret ends, ban't concerned to play fair with us, then, being a just God, He must let us right the balance and use our own judgment where we have the power. If even you—with all your big share of good luck—allow on second thoughts that things don't fall fair, how much more must the most of people feel it so?"

"My luck——" she began and stopped, but her tone indicated she was about to demur, and he invited her to do so.

"There again," he said, "we can only speak what we see, but what we see ban't always the truth. The outside ban't a glass pane to show the inside, but more often a clever door to hide it. I say in my haste how that none ever had more luck to her share than you. Well, I've no right to say that. Perhaps I'm wrong."

"In a way, yes. David, you must know, is a great man now, and 'tisn't the least of a loving woman's hardships to see her husband growing great and herself biding little."

"Good Lord! what a silly point of view!" said he. "Ban't you bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh! How the deuce can the man grow great and leave you behind?"

"I can't explain," she said. "But 'tis so—off and on. Sometimes he catches sight of me in his life, if you understand, and remembers me, and we have precious days. Then again he loses sight of me for a bit. I tell you these things, because you be such a big-hearted, understanding man, Mr. Shillabeer."

"I am," he said. "'Tis my sole vartue to be so. But my usefulness is nearly over. So we come back to that usefulness we started with."

"Your usefulness ban't ended, I'm very sure."

"'Tis only ourselves know about that. A thinking creature, unless he's going old and weak in the head, knows very well when his usefulness be coming to an end. Old I may be growing, but my mind is clear enough, and it tells

me that my work's pretty nearly done. Think if 'twas you, Margaret, and them you loved best was in heaven, and there come into your mind the certainty that there was naught to keep you an hour from them—what would you do?"

"Wait the Lord's time."

"What happens must be in the Lord's time, and can't fall out in any other time. But if the thought comes into your heart to join the dead, ban't it the Lord as sent the thoughts; and if you do join 'em, can it be done without the Lord's wish and will?"

"Of course nothing can happen without the Lord permits, because He's all-powerful and wills naught but good."

"That's all I want for you to see. And it follows—don't it?—that if the still small voice tells me I may go home, the way be clear?"

"Go home!"

"To the home that's waiting where my woman be. I'm home-sick for it—terrible home-sick. And the thought have come very strong of late that there's nothing left to bide for. And a simple thing—such a simple thing! 'Tis merely putting something between you and the air of heaven for a brief minute—a drop of water, or a rope round your throat. Or, if your nature goes against that way, you can let the immortal soul out through a hole——"

His great eyes stared into vacancy, and she gazed with horrified interest at him.

"To kill yourself! Oh, dear Mr. Shillabeer, what are you saying?"

"You may call it killing," he said, "but I don't. I call it opening the half-hatch of the door and going home. They say self-slaughterers be mad mostly—at least, so 'tis brought in most times by a crowner's jury of busy men—men as don't care a button about the job, but want to get back to their work. But I tell you 'tis no mark of weak intellects to do it. A cowardly deed it may be sometimes, but a coward isn't daft as a rule. And now and then 'tis the bravest thing a man can do, and now and then the wisest."

"Never—never!"

"You wait till you've seen life move into the middle time, or lost what's better than life. Keep your own opinions, but don't grow narrow, and don't tell me that the still small voice ever whispered a lie to a Christian man. Usefulness ended, 'tis our place to seek a new bit of ground again where we can be useful anew; and if this

world have done with us, who's to say the next won't be very glad of a new workman ? "

" But not to go like that, surely ? "

" I tell you the Lord's over all," he answered again solemnly. " The Lord chooses the fly for the fish and hedge-sparrow for the hawk, and the mouse for the owl. The Lord comes to me by night, and He says, ' Shillabeer,' and I say, ' I be listening, Lord.' "

Margaret shivered, yet felt no fear of him.

" And then," he continued, " the Lord says, ' They've done with you, Shillabeer ; they want a cheerfuller, hopefuller pattern of man ; ' and I say, ' 'Tis so, Lord ; I read it in their faces.' "

He broke off suddenly and spoke of other things.

" D'you mind when holy words sprang up on the gates and lintels round about—like corn springs after rain ? 'Twas my work ! You're the first to know it, and I must ax of you to keep it dark 'till I'm gone to my reward. But 'twas my thought and deed. By night I'd do it ; and of lonely grey evenings ; and often afore the sun was up. I've walked with God, woman ! "

" And much good those texts in the lone places did. I know they warmed my heart more than once, Mr. Shillabeer."

" Yes, they did a power of good. I could see that."

" To think you was never found out ! "

" The Lord hid me. 'Twas His idea, not mine. Every idea be the Lord's first ; and the cleverest things we can do be planned out by Him and then slipped into a man's intellects, like we post a letter or whisper into a ear."

" But the wicked thoughts ? "

" Good men don't get 'em. Proper-thinking people don't let 'em in. Be the God of Hosts going to suffer a humble, faithful servant like me to be pestered with Satan's nonsense at my time of life ? Would that be a fair thing ? If a man ban't done with the Devil when he's in sight of seventy, 'tis a bad look-out for him. And God's nearly always been a fair sportsman, you mind."

" Somebody far wiser and cleverer than me ought to hear about this," she declared. " I do think and believe you're terribly wrong."

He shook his great head impatiently.

" No, no. I'm in the right. I met Mr. Merle in the churchyard, when I was sitting beside my wife's bones a bit ago, and he walked over and had a tell with me ; and I axed him if our inner thoughts come from God—just to see what he'd say. He answered that every good and perfect

thought comed from the Father of Gifts. So there you are. What is it—this thing driving me to be gone? Why, 'tis the voice of Heaven calling me—just like you yourself might call the cows home off the moor at milking time."

"You make a terrible mistake."

He held up his hand.

"Say not a word, my dear. 'Tis no better than speaking against the Master of all flesh to tell me I've heard wrong. My wife's in Heaven. I've got her that loved me best among the angels at the Throne of Grace. Belike she's just fretting her spirit with cruel impatience because I hang fire. You might think, perhaps, that there wasn't no great haste, eternity being what it is. But if you loved your husband like my wife loved me, you'd know eternity's self was none too long for us to be together again. There's only one little thing that makes me hang back."

"'Tis the Word of God."

"Not a bit. 'Tis the way of man. I'm very doubtful of Parson Merle—not as a righteous creature before Heaven; but he's human, and he's a terrible narrow thinker here and there. If I take myself off, 'tis so like as not he'll get some bee in his bonnet and withhold the burial service or maim it over me, like he did when Pritchard hung himself. Not that that would trouble me very greatly; but supposing that he wouldn't let my bones go beside hers? Such a thing happening would turn me into a wandering ghost till Doom without a doubt."

"Don't give him the chance. Think a very great deal about it," she urged. "You may be all wrong in your opinions, dear Mr. Shillabeer, and right well I know you are. Perhaps, if you was to pray about it to Christ, He'd show you how awful mistaken you was. And as for usefulness, there's no more useful and well thought on man among us."

"I've done my duty, and my duty's done," he said.

"Promise me not to do anything till you've talked to me again," she urged. "At least you might do that. I knew your wife and she loved me."

"Yes, my wife was very fond of you when you was a child," he said. "I'll do your bidding that far then. You speak what be put into you to speak, no doubt. Now I look at you, there's sense as well as sadness in your face. I hope the sense will bide and the sadness lift in God's good time."

The old man departed, and that night Margaret told David of all that she had heard and the condition of Reuben

Shillabeer's mind. He took the matter very seriously and resolved to be busy on the sufferer's behalf.

"I can ill spare the time," he said. "But for a neighbour in such a fix our own affairs must be put aside. I'll go to doctor at Tavistock to-morrow the first thing. He's a rare sportsman and a very keen man. 'Twas him that stood referee in the fight. 'Tis time he took the poor old chap in hand; and Shillabeer's got high respect for him and will trust him, I hope, if he goes about his work clever."

David was not surprised to hear the secret of the texts.

"As a matter of fact amongst a few of us—my father and me and others—'twas an open secret," he said. "Father himself first guessed it. But we didn't say a word for fear of vexing poor old 'Dumpling.' 'Twas a harmless thing, and very likely it did good now and again."

CHAPTER X

THIRD TIME OF ASKING

THE circumstances and necessities of Bartley Crocker's wooing were peculiar, because one-sided. Rhoda naturally never assisted him; indeed, many carefully laid plans for meeting were consciously frustrated by her when she chanced to learn them. At last, however, thanks to Margaret's aid, opportunity fell for a final proposal, and Bartley used it to the best of his power. A day came when David drove Madge over to Tavistock to look at certain houses, and Rhoda stopped at home.

Her own plans began to be very doubtful now, and choice lay before her of returning to her father or continuing to live with David. Her love had made light even of Tavistock; but, in a town, Rhoda's occupation would be gone: at such a place she must cease to justify existence. Her greatest sorrow was reached at thought of living away from David; and a second emotion, only less disturbing, made decision doubly difficult. The apparent complications and secrets of her sister-in-law's life had first alarmed Rhoda, and now they angered her. She read the facts in the light of her own wisdom, and her wisdom led her wide of the mark. She believed that Crocker was using alleged love of her as a pretence and excuse for very different affection. Some such dim thought had long haunted her, and it remained for Dorcas and her brutal speeches to convince Rhoda that she did Margaret no wrong by the suspicion. In sober truth Rhoda had felt shame upon herself when first the fear arose; but then came her hidden watches, the spectacle of familiar meetings and the vigorous word of Mrs. Screech. She knew that Dorcas loved Madge and had not spoken to injure David's wife. Her sister, indeed, evidently approved; and the circumstance convinced Rhoda that her opinion of Dorcas was correct.

And now, upon restless loneliness, came Crocker knowing that he would find her alone. He sneered at himself for a fool as he knocked at the door of "Meavy Cot"; but he had sworn to ask her thrice and would not go from his word, though the vanity of troubling her a third time was very clear to him.

After noon on a late autumn day did Bartley call, and

Rhoda, not guessing who it was that knocked, but thinking it to be one of her brothers, who was due from Ditsworthy, cried out, "Come in!"

She was eating her dinner of a baked potato, bread, cold mutton and a glass of water; and she leapt up as Mr. Crocker appeared.

"Go on," he said. "Please go on—or I'll walk about outside till you've finished, if you'd rather I did."

"I thought 'twas my brother," she said. "I've done my food. David's not at home, if you want him."

"I know," he answered. "I've come to see the only one who was at home; and that's yourself."

She stood by the table. Her mind moved swiftly. She sought to find some advantage in this meeting; but she could not think what to say. David was her sole thought, and how best to serve him she knew not.

"It's a long time since I had a chance to speak to you," said the visitor, "and I'm afraid, from your looks, you wouldn't have given me the chance even now if you hadn't been caught and cornered. But there's no need for you to grudge ten minutes of talk. 'Twill be the last time—unless there's a glimmer of another sort of feeling in you."

Her way of escape seemed to lie through this man's departure alone. She hated every tone of his voice and wished that he was dead.

"If you're going out of it, 'twill be by the blessing of God for all in this house," she answered.

He started and his colour changed to pale.

"A glimmer of another sort of feeling with a vengeance!" he said. "But not the sort I was still fond fool enough to hope for. You shall talk, since you're so fired to do it, and I'll listen. Yes, I'm going. And you won't come?"

Her silence spoke scornfully.

"Well," he continued, "I'm paid what I deserve, I suppose; I've made you loathe me instead of love me. It's bad luck, for I've felt for three years—however, such queer things often happen."

"You never loved a woman like a decent man, for 'tisn't in you to do it," she said. "You think you hide yourself; but you don't. You're evil all through, and the touch of you is evil."

"Why do you say these harsh things? What have I done but court you like an honest man and a patient one?"

"Ask yourself—not me. Ask yourself what you've been doing, and plotting, and amusing yourself about of late. Ask yourself who 'tis you meet in this place and that!"

"Well, I never! So you've been interested in me all

the time! Interested enough to care what I was doing and thinking about. By all right understanding that ought to mean you cared a bit for me. Women don't spy on a man, save for love or hate. And hate me you can't without a cause, though you speak and look as if you did. If I thought you were jealous—but that's too good to be true. Who is it? Out with it! At least I've a right to know who 'tis that I meet so secret while you peep at us."

He bantered her and cared little that she grew rosy and furious; for he knew it was all over now and that they would probably never speak together again.

"You ask that and pretend—and pretend!" she burst out. "As if it might be a score of women! But I know, and 'twasn't for love nor yet hate that I watched you—not for love of you or her anyway."

"Come now—no puzzles! Then I'm after another man's sweetheart on the quiet. Is that it? Well, who is she? I've a right to know in the face of such a charge."

"You're after another man's wife," she said, and faced him without flinching. But still he laughed.

"You maidens! What hen dragons of virtue you are, to be sure. 'Another man's wife'—eh? Then no wonder you look a thought awry at me. Poor fellow! He's terribly wronged, to be sure. Have you told him what I'm doing? Or are you in love with this other chap?"

"Go," she said furiously. "You know the truth in your wicked heart, and I know it, and it's devilish in you to take it like this. I'll suffer no more of you; I'll never breathe the same air with you no more;—and them I care about shan't, if I can help it. You ought to be torn in a thousand pieces by honest men and women—vile thing that you are."

He sat down calmly and patted a dog that rose from the hearth and growled at him in some uneasiness before Rhoda's fury.

"Can't leave you like this—must understand what you're driving at," he declared.

"Then I'll go," she said. "What do you take me for? Have you sunk so low that you don't know a clean-minded creature when you meet one? I'm not a fool, and I'm not blind; and I've seen too well what's been doing of late; therefore I warn you to be gone afore the storm is let loose on you."

"No fear of missing the storm while you're about. And off I shall be ere long now. There's nothing more to keep me, since you've gone out of your wits. All the same, I believe you've thrust yourself under the law for such talk

as this. To tell me I'm going wrong with a married woman! Damn it all, Rhoda, what nasty thoughts have crept into your head? Why don't you name her and have done with it? 'Tis bad enough to know you hate me; but hear this: May the Almighty find and finish me where I sit if——"

"Don't!" she cried out. "Don't take His name here and belike leave your stricken dust rooted in that chair for me to watch till others come! I'll hear no oath and I'll name no names. I know you—I've seen it—I've heard it—heard it from another as quick to do evil as ever you was."

"By God, this is too bad!" he cried, leaping up. "You—you to accuse me of loose conduct and wrong-doing! Look to your eyes that have seen what never happened; and your ears that have listened to lies; and your tongue too—your tongue that can talk thus to a man who loved you truly and uprightly and has kept as straight as yourself from the day he loved you and longed for you! You can't love me and I don't blame you there. You can't love me; but is that a just reason why should lie about me? See to yourself, Rhoda, and you'll find a bitter weed in your own heart that's better out and away. And threaten no more neither. You may drag me as deep as you please through the dirt that's got into your mind—God help you; but don't drag some innocent woman through it. Anyway, you'll never see my face again—spy as you may—for I shall be gone for good in a month or two."

She did not answer and he abruptly left her. He was very angry, very startled and very shocked that she could believe and repeat such a monstrous error. He cast about for some ground in reason, and examined his life. He could only think of the meetings with Margaret Bowden; but that these were actually what Rhoda referred to did not even occur to him. He had, as a matter of fact, travelled recently as far as Plymouth with a woman, but she was Rhoda's own widowed sister from Ditsworthy, and it seemed impossible that she could refer to her.

He puzzled to know what this assault might mean; but apart from these unexpected circumstances attending her refusal, the final negative was all that mattered. That she believed him a libertine soon ceased to trouble Bartley. His anger swiftly vanished before the immediate interest of the future. Nothing remained but to follow his previous plans and depart. He had only waited for Rhoda, and now the coast was clear. Before he reached home, he had finally determined to leave England early in the new year.

CHAPTER XI

BAD NEWS OF MR. BOWDEN

MRS. STANBURY'S habit of mind died hard, even after the truth concerning the Voice at Crazywell had been impressed upon her. Slowly she appreciated the great fact that neither her husband nor her son might longer be considered as under sentence of death; but often still she woke in fear or rose in gloom, while yet her mind retained only the past terror and forgot the more recent joy. Billy Screech had explained to Bartley; and since Bartley was of opinion that no real blame attached to anybody, and that the plot was perfectly reasonable in its original purpose—all things being fair in love—the matter soon blew over. Bart, indeed, declared that Mattacott and Billy ought to pay the doctor's bill for his mother; but they were not of his mind, and Mr. Stanbury, who, despite stout assurances of indifference, felt really much relieved when the truth appeared, very gladly met this charge. The immediate result of the event was a decision on the part of Jane West. Bart, having safely emerged from these supernatural threats of extinction, found her in the most oncoming spirit, and they were now definitely engaged to be married.

With the turn of another year this fact became generally known, and there fell a Sunday in late January when the party from "Meavy Cot" visited Coombeshead and assisted at a formal meal given in honour of Bart's betrothed.

David made efforts to rouse his mother-in-law from her invincible distrust—both of herself and her blood in the veins of the next generation. They talked apart after the meal, and she, as her custom was, doubted her son's ability to fight the world successfully for a wife, and possible children.

"A very good son, I can assure you—never a better. But whether he'll prove a husband of any account, I'm sure I couldn't say," she murmured.

"Of course he will," answered the other. "You don't know what a clever chap Bart is. Jane's a very lucky woman; and she knows it well enough, and her family know it well enough, even if you don't."

It was an amiable fiction with Margaret's husband that

she was largely responsible for his success in life. He often solemnly declared that but for her at the helm, he should never have prospered as was the case, and certainly never have won the great prize at Tavistock. This statement he would make repeatedly, despite his wife's protests and Rhoda's silences. He made it now to Mrs. Stanbury.

"Look at Madge," he said. "If she's such a splendid wife, why are you afeared that Bart won't be a splendid husband? Madge took after you; Bart takes after his father. Why, where should I be if it wasn't for Madge? Not where I stand, I can tell you. She's the corner-stone of the house, and always has been, and always will be. You ought to believe what people tell you about your children."

"'Tis very well to know you think so," she admitted; "all the same, a mother's eye can't overlook the defects."

"Not in your case, seemingly; but 'tis just what a mother's eye be cleverest at doing as a rule," declared he.

"'Tis no good pretending with yourself, as you do," she answered. "You think our Madge have helped you to greatness, and if love and worship could bring you up top, you'd be right. But it can't. You was too strong and steady a man to want any woman's help."

"No, no—never was such a man as that," her son-in-law answered, and firmly believed it. "Madge has helped me to take big views," he continued. "Why, there's no work that we do can taste so good as the work we do for other people. Your daughter teached me that."

The afternoon advanced and Margaret entered the parlour to say that tea was ready in the kitchen.

Bart and Jane comported themselves with high indifference under the ordeal of this entertainment. They had accepted the good wishes and the chaff; they had eaten heartily and departed together as soon as dinner was done.

"They won't be back for tea. They don't want no tea," declared Mr. Stanbury. "Why, they've even got to naming the day! 'Twill be Martin West's turn to find the spread and give the party this time; and if he does all I did for you and Madge, David, I shall be surprised—though he's a richer man than me by a good few pound, I warrant you."

Talk ran on the new romance; then Rhoda reminded David that a Princetown man was to see him that evening within an hour from the present time. He rose at once and prepared to depart. But Margaret did not accompany him.

"I shan't be back afore supper," she said. "Bartley Crocker's coming up presently. He won't see my father and mother no more, for his time is getting short. So I shall bide here till he's been and gone."

"He's so dark about dates," declared David. "We all want to give him a bit of a dinner at 'The Corner House'—a real good send-off; and there's a little subscription started to get the man a remembrance. But he's not in very good spirits now the time's so near; and he rather wants to escape without any fuss. However, if you have the chance, try and find out exactly when he's going, Madge. He'll tell you the secret. The date is fixed, I expect. Try and worm it out of him; and fetch him along to supper, if he'll come."

She promised and David departed with Rhoda.

Bartley Crocker appeared in the valley as they went their way; and he saw them going, but they did not see him.

His sister's affairs now largely occupied young Bowden's mind, because the future, from her standpoint, was difficult. He, however, did not quite comprehend the moody and irritable spirit which Rhoda had of late developed. It fell out, indeed, that this taciturnity and self-absorption caused David first uneasiness and then mild annoyance. Rhoda had ceased to be herself. She was not interested in the future. She spoke of going out of his life. She showed no enthusiasm in any direction, and her attitude to Margaret he had secretly resented on several occasions. He deplored it to Margaret herself, but she had begged him not to think of it again, and declared it a matter of no account. She could afford to be large-minded now, for she believed that Rhoda would soon be gone from her home for ever. As for David, he supposed this unsettled and cloudy weather of his sister's mind to be entirely caused by the forthcoming great upheaval in her life, and the extreme difficulty of deciding on a plan of action. That she had finally refused Crocker and determined to stop in England, he knew; but whether she intended to accompany him and Madge to Tavistock, or return to Ditsworthy, he did not know. None knew—not even the woman herself. Her brother attributed Rhoda's darkness to the trouble of decision; yet it surprised him that she should find decision so difficult. She was one who usually made up her mind with swiftness and seldom departed from a first resolution. But, for once, she appeared unequal to the task of concluding upon any form of action. The truth of Rhoda's difficulties he could not know; and

in his ignorance he revealed a little impatience. Observing this disquiet, she believed that the time had at last come to speak. She knew the danger and perceived that the one thing she cared for in life—her brother's regard—might be imperilled by such a step; but as he, in his turn, now began openly to resent her implicit attitude to Margaret, some decisive action was called for.

And Rhoda upon that homeward walk proposed to speak, to put her discomfort and fear before him, and to trust his affection and wisdom to tide them all over a terrible difficulty. What might have fallen out had she done so cannot be estimated. In the result she never spoke, for there fell an interruption and she was still casting about for the first word, when her brother, Napoleon, rode up on a pony. He had come from Ditsworthy to "Meavy Cot," and his attire marked some haste, for he wore his Sunday coat and waistcoat, but had taken off his trousers and substituted work day garments of corduroy.

"Just been to your place," he shouted as he approached them. "Faither was took bad in the night, and he's a lot worse to-day and reckons he may die of it. And Joshua's gone for doctor, and mother's in a proper tantara. And faither wants for you and Rhoda to come up this moment."

For an instant they stood, aghast and smitten.

"What's took him?" asked David.

"His breathing, and he's all afire and can't let down a morsel of food. You'd better get on this pony and go right up along, David."

"I suppose I had. Chap from Princetown will have his walk for his pains; but it can't be helped."

Napoleon dismounted and David took his place. "You'll come on, you two, after me," he said. "Best to go across through Dennycoombe wood. Please God, 'tis of no account. Faither's so strong and never knoweth ache or pain; therefore what may be a small thing would seem worse to him than it really is."

He started and then turned back again.

"When you pass Coombeshead, just run in, Nap, and tell Margaret what's happened. I may be back home to-night, or I may not be. And bid her remember the calves."

"I shall be back for that," said Rhoda. "I shall go back to-night in any case."

"All right then," concluded David. Then he galloped off and soon disappeared.

His sister and the boy tramped without speech together until, glowing like the bright fur of a wolf, all grey and

russet, Dennycoombe wood rose before them, flung on the distant side of Sheep's Tor in evening light.

"I'll wait for you by the gate yonder," said Rhoda. "Your nearest way from here be to the left. Don't you stop talking, mind: you may be useful up at home. Just tell Madge what's fallen out and then come after me."

"I can travel twice so fast as you," answered the boy. "No call for you to wait. I'll over-get you long afore 'tis dark."

He left her and she went forward, passed under Down Tor, crossed the stream and skirted the great wood beyond. She reached the gate and stopped for her brother as she had promised: but he did not come, and presently she went her way through the edge of the trees. Then suddenly, going on silent feet, she heard voices at hand. A great stone towered there and in a moment she understood that her sister-in-law and Bartley Crocker were on one side of it, and knew not that she was upon the other. She guessed that the man had taken leave of the party at Coombeshead Farm and that Margaret had departed with him.

This indeed had happened. Bartley made but a short stay at the Stanburys' and Madge left when he did. They were now sitting together and talking.

Rhoda listened but could not hear more than a chance word intermittently.

"Your husband wanted to give me a spread and a send-off in the old-fashioned way, but, somehow, I've no stomach for any such thing just at present," declared Mr. Crocker.

"'Tis natural you shouldn't have."

"I shall write to David. I can't stand all these good-byes, and all the leave-taking business."

"'Tis crushing to think you're so nearly gone."

"But mind you keep the secret of the day and tell none, Madge—till I'm off. Those I care for shall hear from me—t'others don't matter. There's nothing left to keep me but you, and I can't make you happier by staying."

"Don't say that."

"Not really I can't. We're beginning new lives in new places—you and me."

"So we are in a way."

"What does Rhoda do?"

"She can't make up her mind seemingly. She's very sad."

"She's very mad, if you ask me. I wish to God some man could find how to sweeten her mind. And you're

sad because she is. I knew it the moment I heard your voice half an hour ago."

"'Tis wonderful to think how you can always tell by my tone of voice how 'tis with me! But then there's nobody like you for understanding us women. You'd have made a rare husband for the right one, Bartley."

"Yes; and the right one—well, perhaps, I'll find her over the water. 'Tis the day after to-morrow I go. I sail off from Plymouth, so that's all easy and straightforward."

"Be the *Shamrock* a good big ship?"

"Big enough for my fortunes."

"We must see one another once more, Bartley."

"Of course we must, Madge."

They moved forward as they spoke, and Rhoda saw Bartley kiss Margaret, and observed that her sister-in-law was weeping. Then came hasty feet and Napoleon appeared. He shouted from a distance.

"She ban't there! She's gone! I waited a bit and had a dollop of figgy pudden and told 'em the bad news about faither."

"Hullo!" said Bartley to Rhoda. "You!" He looked blankly at her, but she ignored him and turned to Margaret. Hate was in her voice. She spoke quickly and waited for no reply, then moved on with her brother.

"Napoleon have been to seek you at your father's farm, Margaret Bowden, but you was better employed seemingly. My father is took very ill indeed, and your husband be gone up over to him. You'd best get home—if you can spare the time to think of your home. I shall be back by night, but David may not be able to come."

She swept on her way and left them staring at each other. Margaret was dishevelled and the shock of this meeting had dried her tears.

"Good Lord! that's bad luck. She saw me kiss you, I'll swear," murmured Bartley. "And now she'll believe there's another married woman in the case! Will she tell David?"

"What if she does? I'll tell him myself. D'you think he'd care?"

"Shall I go after her and explain?"

"No," she answered. "Let her be."

"It's time I was off anyhow. But poor old Elias! 'Very ill indeed,' she said. I hope he's not booked. Can't think of Ditsworthy without him."

They talked a little longer and Mr. Crocker was glad that there had come distraction for Margaret's mind. She deeply felt parting from him, for he had bulked largely in

her life, and he too had enjoyed her loyal friendship and owed her much, though her labours on his behalf were all fruitless. But now the moment was come in which they must part; and he knew that the parting was probably eternal. He did not, however, intend that she should know it. He lied glibly about coming over to "Meavy Cot" on the following day; then he talked of other matters, and then, when they had drifted down to Nosworthy Bridge, pretended to be amazed at the time.

"I must be pushing back in a hurry. My boxes go off first thing to-morrow. And I dare say I shall get up to Ditsworthy after dark and may have a tell with David there. But if Rhoda has already told him she saw me kissing you——!"

"He'd laugh. He's not the sort to mind that between me and you."

"I know he isn't. I was only joking."

She revealed extreme solicitude for his future."

"You'll take all care of yourself wherever you be; and you've promised, on your word of honour, to come home and see old friends inside five year."

"On my word of honour. And you've got to write, and keep me up in the news, and tell me all about the house at Tavistock and everywhere else that's interesting."

He shook hands and moved off quickly, while she, too, went on her way. But, when her back was turned, he stood still and took his last look; for, despite promises, the man had no intention to see her again. His ship was to start after noon on the following day, and he meant to leave Sheepstor at dawn of the morrow.

Now Margaret swiftly faded into the dusk, and he went forward, subdued and as melancholy as his spirit allowed.

"So good and brave a woman as ever walked this earth," he said to himself. "God send me such another; but 'tis hardly likely."

For her sake he made time that night to go to Ditsworthy and speak with David; and the following evening —at the hour in which he had promised to visit "Meavy Cot" for a final farewell—he was aboard and watching Devon fade swiftly along the edge of the sea. A shadow lay above the grey, rolling ridges; and then that shadow sank out of his eyes for ever.

But Bartley Crocker belonged to the order of lighter spirits who can close the book of their past without a pang; and he did so now.

CHAPTER XII

RHODA AND MARGARET

WHEN Rhoda returned from Ditsworthy, she stated briefly that a doctor had seen Mr. Bowden and declared there was no immediate cause for uneasiness. David, however, proposed to stop for the night and help his mother.

The women supped silently—each angered with the other; and then happened that which loosed the floodgates of Rhoda's passion and precipitated a deed which, since the recent meeting in the wood, she had strongly considered. She had changed her mind with regard to David; and now, instead, it had come to her as a reasonable thing to attack Margaret directly. But she hesitated to do so until the latter unconsciously provoked her. Rhoda had not spoken to David of the meeting with Madge and Bartley Crocker; but now David's wife returned to the subject and awoke anger in Rhoda, so that she lost self-control and spilled out all the bitterness of her mind.

"Since your father's not in danger, one has time for one's own thoughts again," said Madge, "and they are dark enough for the minute. You looked terrible surprised in Dennycoombe wood a bit ago, and you was terrible rude to me; but why for I don't know. You puzzle me sometimes, Rhoda. Can't you even feel that 'tis sad the man who loved you so well be going so far ways off?"

"The sooner the better."

"You're heartless, I do believe."

"You make up for it, if I am."

"I suppose you're shocked because I kissed him. Did you tell David? I lay he didn't pull a very long face about it. But what's come over me? To think of me talking in this loud, wild way! Forgive me, Rhoda. I meant nothing. You can't help being what you are, and feeling what you feel, any more than I can. I'm not myself tonight. I shall miss him cruel, and I don't care who knows it."

The other kept silence. Her colour had gone and her breast was rising and falling rapidly. Anger put a strain on her lungs and called for air.

"Oh, Rhoda," cried Madge, feebly, "why didn't you

take him? Nobody will ever love you like that again; and nobody will ever understand you so well as Bartley did. You were a fool—a fool not to take him. Now look at it—your life all useless and nowhere to turn, unless you come to Tavistock with us. Think better of it even now. Go to him to-morrow; keep him here afore 'tis too late and he's gone."

Then the other rose to her feet, and spoke slowly, and crushed the slighter creature for ever.

"So you've sunk to that! You can dare to sit there and say that openly to me. I'm to marry him—I'm to drag myself through the dirt of that man's life, so that you can have him always at your elbow!"

Margaret stared, and in her turn grew pale.

"What are you saying or thinking?" she cried. "Are you out of your mind?"

"If I am, I've had enough to make me. But I'm sane enough—for my brother's sake. I've kept sane all these cruel, cursed months, while you've gone your way, and forgotten yourself, and disgraced his name. Hear me, I say! Don't you shout, for I can shout louder than you. What I tell be God's truth; and if you don't confess it, I'll do it for you. D'you think I don't know what men are? Nine in ten be of the same beastly pattern; and this man's the worst of all, for he's a liar and a thief, and he came to me with his false tales, but his mind was always running on you; and he came to David and pretended to be his friend—and——"

She caught her breath and Margaret spoke swiftly.

"What do you accuse me of?"

"I accuse you of being unfaithful and untrue to my brother; and right well you know it is so. I've watched—I know—and I'm not the only one. My sister Dorcas—clever enough in evil she be—she knows it too. And belike a many others among that knave's friends, for he's the sort to rob a woman of her all, and then laugh to men about it. Maybe all the world knows it but David's self. I say you've sinned against my brother, and I say he must know it—now—now—afore he begins at Tavistock. And, please God, he'll put you away from him, and choose rather to live his life maimed alone, than with a foul wretch like you under his roof."

"These are hideous lies—you're dreaming—you're mad to say such things. You—you to come to an honest wife with this filthy story! 'Tis you shall be cast out—'tis you.—Oh, my God! to think that I should hear such words uttered against me by another woman!"

Madge's brief flash of fight died even as she spoke. She was not fashioned to carry the battle with a high hand. She began to think of her husband.

"You shall say this to David and see where you find yourself," she continued. "Is not a man's wife nearer to him than a sister? Will he believe you rather than me? Will he believe Dorcas rather than Bartley Crocker himself? That you—you, Rhoda, of all women, could sting me so! That you—you we thought so pure and clean as newly-fallen snow—could invent such a thing! That you, who know me so well and my love and worship of David. . . . Oh, Rhoda, I'm sorry for you!"

"Be sorry for yourself. Well—and too well—I know you. I had to spy. I ban't ashamed of it. There was nothing else but to tell him and let him spy. And I couldn't do that till I knew. 'Tis all of a piece—all clear to any human mind—foul or fair. God judge me if I was quick to think evil. I was slow to do it. I fought not to believe it. I tried heart and soul not to see it. But you took good care I should see it. Wasn't you always after him? Didn't you meet him in secret places scores of times? How could I not see? And him coming to me; and you pretending to want me to take him. Yet 'twas no pretence neither, for 'twould have suited you both well enough. And David, working day and night, and trusting you, and always ready at a word to pleasure you. That proud of you and hungry for your happiness—— But it's ended now. It ended to-day when I saw you in the wood. Not that I've not seen you kissing him afore—fawning on his hand, by God! I've watched—yes—and seen enough to know all I didn't see. And he's going to know it too—David. He's got to know for his own honour's sake, and he shall."

"Will he believe it? Never! May God strike me here afore you, and kill me slow the awfullest way that ever woman died, if by thought or deed I've been false to him."

"Ah! Even so the man talked, and he's alive yet. But the A'mighty won't forget either of you. You add lies to lies as he did. But I know they're lies. You needn't talk as if I was a fool; I know him well enough—none better. Did such as him—lecherous-minded beast that he was—dance about in lonely woods and secret places with you for nothing? If an angel from heaven told me you was honest I'd not believe it. And I'm stronger than you think—stronger far than you—with David, I mean. He knows I'm single-minded, anyway. He knows I've got no thought or hope in the whole world except his good.

He knows right well that I've been a kind sister to you and never done anything but strive for your happiness as well as his. Till now—till now. And he'll believe me; for he knows that I couldn't lie if I was tortured for speaking the truth. And I am tortured—tortured as never a woman was tortured yet. But he's got to hear it; and he shall hear it afore that man goes. And, as for you, whether he believes me or you, God's my eternal judge but I'll never ope my mouth to you again as long as I live."

She said no more and went up to her room. Margaret waited a while and then followed her; but Rhoda's door was locked and she refused to answer when the other spoke.

Then the wife descended and sat with companionship of her thoughts. She lived through many hours of poignant grief. Again and again she fell away stricken by her own heart; but she returned as often to the theme; she strove to pierce the problem and see what her sister-in-law could mean. How was it possible that such transparent innocence as Margaret's could from any standpoint look so vile? The bitterest enemy was powerless to throw one shadow over her friendship with Bartley Crocker; and yet here was her brother's sister frenzied with this fearful idea, and speaking of it as a fact proved beyond question. Rhoda believed in it as surely as she believed in her own life. She was prepared to stake her future and David's love for her upon it. She was going to separate Margaret from David, or herself from David, for ever. One or other event must inevitably happen.

A thousand plans of action rushed through the wife's brain, and their number defeated their varied purposes. Her native timidity served her ill now. She did nothing but sit and think and reconstruct the past. She remembered all the meetings with Bartley and their many plots and plans to win Rhoda for him. She recollected the most intimate conversations, when her nature or his formed the subject of their speech. She had once kissed his hand in a sudden impulse, when he announced the means to cure her mother. But she did not recall a single perilous or dangerous pass between them; for indeed no such thing had ever existed. Their regard was based on close and lifelong understanding and friendship. There never had been a reciprocal passage of passion, even in the days of her freedom. Her regard was the regard of an ordinary woman for her favourite brother—an affection absolutely untinged by any conscious sexual emotion whatsoever. Even at that, she had not loved him as Rhoda loved David.

She was not cast in the great mould of Rhoda—great if unfinished.

At waste of night she began to perceive that she could be no match for Rhoda. Her instinct of self-preservation inclined her first to David, then to Bartley, and then to her father's home. She determined at last to rest until day, and sought her bed. She lighted a match in the dark after a sleepless hour. It went out before she could reach a candle, and she was struck by the trivial phenomenon that, long after the match was extinguished, its light shone in her eyeballs and throbbed in the gloom like fiery rings until the impression waned. She rose an hour before dawn and dressed and descended. Then she went out and breathed the chill morning wind. As yet it was quite dark. Looking up, she saw that a candle burned in Rhoda's room. Some subtle psychological instinct crushed her spirit before the spectacle of that woman's steadfast and unsleeping watch. An impulse to get away from Rhoda overpowered Margaret. She returned, fetched her sun-bonnet, and hastened off without any fixed purpose of destination.

When David's sister came down before six o'clock, the house was empty. She, too, had passed through storms; she also had faltered at the hour when life's pulses beat lowest and midnight sets its dead weight upon human hearts. She had longed to rise and get into the air; but she was determined not to lose sight of Margaret until David came home. Yet for a time she had lost consciousness and slept awhile at edge of dawn. And during those fitful slumbers, Margaret had departed.

The day found Rhoda assured of her own action, though the result of it she could not foretell; but thus to have thrust matters upon their climax was a relief to her, and she felt only interested further to learn the extent of David's future sufferings and her power to lessen them.

That Margaret had disappeared did not much astonish her. She doubted not that her sister-in-law was gone to have the first speech with David. Rhoda reviewed her own knowledge of facts and prepared her own statement. She perceived that she herself must come vilely out of it, as a spy and informer; but she kept her intentions and object in view, and believed that, suffer as he must, David would not lose sight of her motives. Her only desire was that her brother's home might be cleansed—at any costs to its inhabitants. She thirsted to speak to David and hear his voice.

Yet, when she saw him coming alone through the morning,

her thoughts flashed along another train, and she held her peace until a more fitting time for speech. And this she did because she guessed that something vital had happened to Margaret—something which must justify her attitude and sweep away the last shadow of doubt.

Then her brother surprised her mightily ; for, when she told him that Margaret had gone from the house before daylight, he seemed but little astonished to hear it.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SEARCH

MORE for thought of Margaret than the sick master of Ditsworthy, had Crocker climbed to the Warren House upon his last evening at Sheepstor. He asked to see David, spent half an hour with him, and spoke explicitly of Rhoda, of his final failure to win her, and of the attitude that she had adopted towards him during that interview.

"God knows I wish her naught but good," he said; "and first and best that her mind should be cleansed of things she's heard from some unknown enemy and believes against me. She's got it in her head that I'm a worthless blackguard, born to make trouble. When she met me with your wife in Dennycoombe wood, a few hours since, she spoke as if I'd no business to be talking to Margaret. I say this for Margaret's sake; because, before saying 'good-bye' I kissed Margaret, and your sister saw me do so, and went white with passion. There's that about kissing she can't forgive or forget, seemingly. But I'm off to-morrow and don't want to leave any trouble behind me."

David nodded.

"You must allow for Rhoda. She's terrible fretted and has got a deal on her mind just now," he said.

"That's true enough; and she's often right; and I'm a fashion of man not worthy to name in the same breath with her. I only mention these things for your sake and Margaret's. Your sister is cruelly wrong about me, anyway, and maybe time will show her so. Only she mustn't be wrong about Madge. Me and Madge did very often meet, and even in secret, if you like. But why? Not to hide anything from anybody but Rhoda herself. Madge was very wishful for me to have Rhoda, and again and again we planned and plotted together what she could do, and what I could do, to bring it about. You understand that?"

"Why, yes; Margaret always told me about it of course."

"But perhaps Rhoda didn't see what we wanted to be together for behind her back. A stupid muddle sure enough, and nothing but Madge wanting to do her and me a good turn was the cause of it. You clear her mind for her

the first minute you can, David. And if she's had a row with Margaret, make 'em be friends again. Only you can do it."

Thus he spoke, and the other saw all clearly.

"Rhoda's been unlike herself a good while," he answered. "And now I begin to see daylight. Of course, if she had some wild, silly fancies against you, and people have been telling her that you're not straight, she may have been vexed and anxious that you saw so much of my wife. For my sake she'd have felt so. But why she should have believed anything against you, or who spoke against you—that I can't say. However, your character is safe with me. I'll soon have it out and let loose some common sense into her brains. You must allow a bit for unmarried girls like her. They can't see life whole, and they get wrong opinions about men's minds. She's wise as need be every other way; but where men and women combined are the matter, she never can take proper views. She's jealous for me without a doubt—maybe because I was never known to be jealous for myself: too busy for that. And why should I be with a wife like mine?"

"You may well ask it. Madge would rather die than think an evil thought, let alone do an evil deed, against you. As for Rhoda—she beats me. Most of the man-hating sort be ugly and a bit hard at the angles; but she—she's as pretty as any wife you ever saw in the world. The Lord may send her a husband yet! And mind you let me know if it happens, for I'd like to give her a wedding-present worth having."

They parted then.

"Well, good luck to you," said the elder; "and don't forget to let us home-staying chaps have a sight of you again presently, when a few years be past and you've started on your fortune."

"And all good wishes to you, David; and, for a last kindness, I'll ask you to get Madge to see my Aunt Susan Saunders sometimes and cheer her up. She badly wanted for me to take her along to Canada—poor old lady; but of course I couldn't do that—such a wanderer as I shall be till I find that place that pleases me."

Thus it came about that when David returned to his home and heard that Madge was not there, he felt no intense astonishment. He doubted not that sharp words had passed and that his wife had left Rhoda until he should come home. For the time, however, he kept silence. He determined to speak to Rhoda and Madge together when the latter reappeared. He felt certain that

she had gone to Coombeshead ; and he also believed that she would stop with her parents until he went to fetch her.

"Put on the griddle and cook me a bit of meat for breakfast," he said to Rhoda. "I'm very hungry, along of having sat up most of the night with father. He's come well through it. He slept off and on, and feels he's safe this morning. I shall go up again later, when Madge be back."

He ate, then started to Coombeshead ; but his wife was not there, neither had any news been received concerning her. Then he walked across to Sheepstor, but none had seen or heard of Margaret. He called at "The Corner House" to drink, and stopped there a while. But his mind was now much agitated. He soon set off for Ditsworthy ; and he prayed as he went that there his increasing fears for Madge might be laid at rest.

It was after noon when he arrived at his father's house, to learn that the doctor had pronounced Mr. Bowden better. But no news of Margaret greeted him. His twin brothers were just setting out for Princetown, to procure certain medical comforts for their father. Now they went as far as Coombeshead with David, and there he left them and returned again to the Stanburys. Still they had heard nothing. In grave alarm the husband went home, but Margaret was not there. Night now approached, and the man braced himself to set about systematic search and summon responsible aid.

Rhoda had left a hot meal for him and he ate it quickly ; but she herself had departed. A pencilled note explained that she had gone to seek Margaret at certain farms where chance might have led her. David now much desired to cross-question Rhoda closely as to the matters that fell between her and Margaret on the preceding evening ; but for the present this was impossible. He was just about to set off, give the alarm and institute search-parties when, the twins, Samson and Richard, suddenly appeared together and brought news.

. . . . . .

When David's wife left her home before dawn, she walked aimlessly onward until thought worked with her and directed her footsteps to a definite goal. The first note of light in the sky presently beckoned her, and unconsciously she set her feet in that direction. She moved along eastward by the leat, where it raced down a steep place under Cramber Tor ; and she reflected between three

courses. Her first thought was to seek David before all others, tell him what Rhoda was going to tell him, and explain the truth. Then she feared. The day broke very cold and dawn chilled her and lowered her spirit. Next she considered of Bartley; and it seemed a wise thing to seek him and go to David with him. Finally she thought of her father, and wondered whether wisest action might not take her to her old home. It was a father's and a brother's part to fight this battle for her. They would stand before David, man to man, and refute the infamy that Rhoda had prepared for his ears. But some mood led to Bartley Crocker before the rest. She turned presently and set her face to Sheepstor. And thus it happened that standing near the village, on high ground above it, she actually saw the early departure of her friend. He drove swiftly away under her eyes, and she was powerless to reach him now or to communicate with him. He had promised to see her again that evening; but doubtless to escape emotional leave-takings and an elaborate departure he had planned this secret exit. She did not blame him; but now that he was irrevocably gone, she doubted terribly for herself and asked herself what next must happen. She did not fear David, but she greatly feared Rhoda. She knew her husband's estimate of Rhoda, and she suspected that in a deliberate contest between them he might lean to the stronger nature. He had never been jealous or shown the shadow of such an instinct, and that thought comforted her; but Rhoda was very strong, and if Rhoda was not mad, then she must be armed with arguments to support her awful belief. Margaret had nothing but denials—and Bartley was gone. Perhaps, against the lying testimony that Rhoda possessed, and doubtless believed, her bare denial would prove all too weak. She amazed herself to find how calmly she considered the sudden situation—a situation that yesterday she would have fainted to consider. Now, looking at the empty road when Bartley's vehicle had left it, she felt that salvation lay in one direction alone. She must see David before Rhoda could see him. He would return that morning; therefore her safest course was to go home swiftly, lie hidden by the way, and intercept him as he came along. She set off again, and as she returned, became conscious of physical hunger. But the sensation passed and she pressed forward until her home appeared. She came back in time to find herself too late; for she saw her husband descend the hill to "Meavy Cot" and enter the house while yet she was half a mile distant.

Now active fear got hold upon Margaret. In spirit

she heard Rhoda's voice; she listened to the indictment; she pictured David's incredulity. He would surely start to see Bartley Crocker on the instant; and he would find Bartley gone for ever. And then? Her thoughts turned again to her own people. She cried out from her heart for protection. Her mental weakness gained upon her as she grew physically more feeble. Her legs trembled under her. She turned, and crouched, and crept behind a wall, that no chance eye from "Meavy Cot" might see her aloft on the hill. Then she started to go to Coombeshead, and ran some distance until she grew suddenly weak and was forced to sit and rest herself for fear of fainting. David would doubtless guess that she had gone home. He would follow; he was certain to be upon the way now, and he must overtake her long before she reached Coombeshead. Increasing terror and decreasing reason threw her into a shivering sweat. She jumped up and left the road to Coombeshead, and so in reality avoided David, who had now set out for the farm of the Stanburys. She actually saw him pass within a hundred yards of her, and she rejoiced at her escape. Then, when he had gone by, she went forward to Crazywell and hid there, in deep gorse brakes not far distant from the water. Here she was safe enough for the present. She drank from a spring, and then sat on a stone until she grew very cold.

The time for useful thought or a sensible decision was past; the critical hours, when this woman's humble intellect might have led her to salvation, had gone by. Now she stood weak every way—physically reduced, mentally depressed and fear-stricken. She had declined upon a state which found her a prey to unreal terrors, phantom-driven, pervious to the secret evils of heredity. These intrinsic ills, latent in her blood and brain, now found their vantage, and presently reduced the daughter of Constance Stanbury to a condition of peril. It was in this pitiful case, as she wandered some hours later near Crazywell, that there came to her two children, and she had speech with them. She was light-headed; but they did not know it. They stared at the things she said and thought that brother David's wife was making very queer jokes.

Samson and Richard, with their basket carried between them, staggered steadily homewards through thickening dusk. They wondered which of the luxuries in the basket their father would eat first; and they rather envied him his collapse, when they considered the attractive nature of these prescriptions. Then they came suddenly upon Margaret

standing by the gorse brakes. She started and was about to dive into cover, like a frightened beast or bird, when she recognized the boys.

"Hullo!" cried Samson. "Why, 'tis Madge! Whatever be you doing up here all by yourself?"

She stared at them as they set down their basket and rested their arms.

"Oh, Lord, these good things be heavy!" declared Richard.

"Have 'e got a bit of meat there, Dicky?" she asked, her nature crying for food.

"I should just think we had. A half of a calf's head for soup, and three bottles of jelly, and a bottle of wine. I wish I was faither!"

"And grapes, took out of a barrel of sawdust," said Samson.

"A long journey for your little legs; but naught to mine," she said. "You must know, you boys, that I be going to set out on a journey myself as far as from here to the stars—or further."

They laughed at the idea.

"Be you? And what'll David say?" asked Richard.

"He'll understand very well. 'Tis for him I shall do it. I lay he'll be glad."

"Why don't he go along with you?"

"Not yet; but he'll come after some day."

"Where's your luggage to?" asked the practical Samson.

"Don't want none—no luggage—no money—no ticket—only a pinch of courage. Mr. Shillabeer taught me the way. If you've outlived your usefulness, 'tis better to make room for better people. And there's no such thing as wrong-doing, Dick, because God A'mighty being all-powerful, won't let it happen. You and Samson might think as you do wrong sometimes."

"So they tell us," admitted Samson.

"Not you—you're God's children and can't no more do wrong than the birds and the angels."

"That's worth knowing," said Richard.

"Nor yet me: I must do what I must, and the journey's got to be took. Because I may be useful in one place, though I can't be in another. . . . 'Tis a bitter cruel thing to be misunderstood, Samson."

"So it is—as I said last time Joshua gave me a lacing and found out after 'twas Nap," he answered.

"When might you start?" asked Richard.

"There's naught to keep me—my usefulness be ended. But I'm that terrible hungry."

"I should go home along and have a bit of supper first."

"No, no, Sam. Good-byes be such sad things. Better I go without 'em. Bartley, he went off without, and he was wise. But I see'd him set out. All the same, his journey's but a span long to mine."

The boys were puzzled. They talked together.

"Might us give her a biscuit—one of them big uns?" whispered Richard; but Samson refused.

"No. 'Twill be found out, and of course they'll say we ate it."

"Where do 'e set out from?" asked Richard.

"From this here pool."

"Funny place to go on a journey from," said Samson. "'Tis my belief you'm having a game with us."

Margaret shook her head.

"Never no more," she said. "We've played many and many a good game—you two and me. But they all be ended now. I'm going to new usefulness somewhere long ways off—terrible busy I'll be, without a doubt; and you be both growing into men, and busy too. But don't you forget me, you boys—because I never will forget neither of you."

"You talk as if you wasn't going to come back," said Richard. "I'm sure David would make a terrible fuss if you was to go for long."

"But Rhoda won't," added Samson. "Rhoda don't like you overmuch. For that matter, she don't like anything but David and dogs. Me and Dick don't set no store by Rhoda, do we, Dick?"

"No," said Richard. "We do not."

"I'll come back—I'll come back to watch over David," said Madge, suddenly. "Yes, I won't bide away altogether. I couldn't. But not same as I am now—not a poor, broken-hearted, useless good-for-nothing, as have worn out her welcome in the world. I'll be a shining, joyous thing then—winged like a lark, and so sweet a singer too."

"You can sing very nice, and always could," said Dick, graciously.

"I'd sing to you boys now, but there's no time. Be it night or morning with us? I'm sure I couldn't say, for I've been up and about these days and days."

"They'm looking for you, come to think of it," said Samson, suddenly. "David was up over after dinner."

"Was he kind or cross?"

"Neither—but a good bit flurried seemingly."

"He don't know about the journey, you see. I'm afraid he'll be sorry—after. He'll be sorry, won't he, Dicky?"

"He'll be terribly vexed without a doubt," declared Richard. "In fact, if I was you, I'd change your mind. You oughtn't to do nothing without telling him—ought her, Samson?"

"No, her oughtn't," answered his brother.

"You two—two at a birth," she said. "Got together and born together! 'Tis a very beautiful thing—a beautiful thing, sure enough. You'm one—not two at all—one in heart and thought and feeling, one in your little joys and fears and hopes. And even so I'd thought to be with David. But I wasn't strong enough and understanding enough for that. He's too much above me. And us had no childer, you see. There comed no babby to my bosom, and so—there 'tis—the usefulness and hope of me all gone—a withered, worn-out blossom as never set no fruit. And when the flower be fallen, 'tis all over and forgot. My mother knowed best, you see, She always feared it wouldn't come to good. How right she was!"

"What silly old rummage you do talk," said Richard. "Never heard the like! Why for don't you go home? Didn't Madge ought for to go home, Sam?"

"Yes, she did," said Samson, "this instant. She'm mazed, I believe."

"Pisgies been at her, I reckon," hazarded his brother.

"I'm going home," she answered. "On my solemn word of honour, as a living Christian, I'm going home; and if I'm there afore them I care about—what's the odds? Only there's no marrying nor giving in marriage there. Won't Rhoda be happy then! But I tell you two witty boys that I'm wickedly wronged, and the world will know it. I won't stoop to defend myself—I'm above that; but my God will defend me, and you must defend me—both of you. 'Tis a very cruel thing to tell lies against the innocent—them as never did you harm—them as only thought and planned always to better you and bring you happiness. And wasn't my sorrow large enough, the black sorrow of the women that never rock cradles—but she must——? . . . . You'll always have a good word for me, Richard—won't 'e?—if 'tis only for the sake of the fun we've had."

"So we will then," said Dick. "And if anybody says anything against you, me and Sam won't suffer it. Because you're a jolly good sort and always have been. Never was one like you for cake—never."

Samson pulled at Richard's sleeve in the gathering gloom.

"Us had better go," he whispered.

"Us must go now," repeated Dicky to Margaret.

"Good-bye then, and God bless you both—such little

men as you be growing ! Yet 'tis cruel not to give me a bite from your basket. I'm faint for want of food—God's my judge but I am."

"Can't, for fear of catching it. You'll do best to go back home," advised Samson.

"I shall be there afore you are. 'Tis beautiful to be there first of all, to welcome all the rest as they come in one after t'other, like homing-pigeons. If they only knowed . . . if they only knowed how dearly I've loved 'em all—Rhoda, too. I tried so hard to make her a happy woman. But they will come to know at journey's end. And she'll know then. 'Twill all be burning light then, with nothing hid and the last heartache lifted."

They took their basket and crept off. In the dark they stopped and listened. She was singing.

"Never knowed her like that afore," said Richard. "I've a good mind to take back a biscuit for her and chance what they'll say. She's terrible leery* and terrible queer."

"Us had better get home and tell about her."

They pushed on for a quarter of a mile, and then Samson had another idea.

"We'm nearer 'Meavy Cot' than anywheers," he said. "Us had better go and tell David. 'Tis his job to look after Madge, I should think—him being her husband."

"I'm cruel tired," answered Richard; "and as 'tis we shall catch it pretty hot for being such a deuce of a time."

"We'll leave the basket here, and just run down and then come back for it. And as to catching it, we shall catch it worse if we don't tell David, and he comes to hear about it after Madge has sloped off."

"You go, and I'll bide here and keep guard over the basket," suggested Dick; but Samson would not have this.

"No," he answered firmly, "I'm not going without you. You know very well us can't do naught apart."

They left the basket on the top of a wall and turned back and reached "Meavy Cot." Then they told David that Madge was by Crazywell, and much to their disappointment, he seized his hat and rushed from the house before they had time to give any description of their remarkable conversation with her. Rhoda was not in, and finding themselves alone, the boys sought the larder and ventured to eat heartily. Then they went on their way, cheered at consciousness of well-doing and the reward of well-doing.

All that David had heard was how his brothers had met with Madge by Crazywell. More he did not stop to

* *Leery*=Hungry.

learn; and when some time afterwards he stood by the pool, tramped its shores and shouted Margaret's name until the hollowed cup of the little tarn echoed, he judged that the children had been mistaken in the darkness and imagined that some other was Madge. Because he saw no sign of her and heard no answer to his cries. For a time he wandered through the night and splashed along the fringes of the pool; then he abandoned the search, groped his way upwards, and returned home.

His wife, however, had been within sound of his voice. Through the locked portals of a sleeping ear his cries had reached and wakened her. When Samson and Richard were gone, she sang a hymn about the joys of heaven; and then Nature made a sudden and imperious appeal for sleep. She had not slumbered for forty hours, and now, succumbing swiftly, lay down under the gorse and sank into oblivion.

Anon her husband's voice reached her brain, and roused her consciousness. His loud summons, filtering through the sleep-drenched avenues of her brain, begot happy dreams therein. She smiled and wakened, Then she heard him calling in the darkness, and sudden terrors bound her hand and foot. His voice, lifted in deep anxiety, to her seemed laden with wrath. Her dismantled mind hid the truth and turned the man's cry into a sinister threat. Therefore she cowered motionless, breathless, like a bird that sees a hawk at hand, until he was gone, and silence returned.

She slept no more, but it was not until midnight that her wounded intellect again roused itself. Then chance, quickening propensities that had for ever remained asleep in another environment, swept the woman to action.

CHAPTER XIV

DAVID AND RHODA

DAWN brought forth a wonder in the sky and lighted accumulations of little clouds that ranged in leagues under highest heaven. Like flakes of mother-o'-pearl upon a ground of aquamarine the cirri were evenly and regularly disposed. Seen horizontally, perspective massed them until they hid the firmament, but overhead the pale interstices of space appeared. Like a ridged beach at low tide was the sky—like a beach at break of day when morning twinkles between bars of wave-woven sand and touches the transparent green water there. A glory irradiated heaven, and each of the myriad cloudlets moving above the sunrise was stroked upon its breast with amber. Then the herald light fell from them into earth-born mists beneath.

These phenomena were reflected in the eyes of Reuben Shillabeer; and for a moment they roused within him thoughts of the gates of pearl and the streets of gold that belonged to the haven of his hopes. He had risen before day, and now moved across the Moor with his mind steadily affirmed. The journey concerning which Margaret had babbled to her husband's brothers, this old man now meant to make. But he had hidden his secret close, and those who knew him best supposed that his mind had entered a more peaceful and contented road of late. They were right. After decision came great calm. His affairs were in order; his work was finished. He walked now as one who had already taken his farewells of the earth and all that belonged to it. The sky pleased him with its splendour, for it promised happiness. He thought of his wife and supposed her behind the dawn, moving uneasily, eagerly, full of excitement and joy, counting the minutes that still separated him from her. He was going up to Crazywell to drown himself.

On his way the man stood still before one of his own messages. Black along the top bar of a gate, a text confronted him: the same that had led Bart Stanbury to hasten his proposal of marriage.

"*Now is the accepted time.*"

The old prize-fighter was well satisfied at this omen.

He tramped through mist and over frost-white heaths among the ruined lodges of the stone men; he breasted the gorse-clad hill above Kingsett, and presently stood and looked down into the cup of the pool, and saw the fire and flame of the morning sky mirrored sharply there. A thin vapour still softened the reflections from above and hung about the water, and a scurf of ice lay round the edges of Crazywell. The place was deserted. Winter had made a home there and darkness of sleeping vegetation encompassed all, save for the silver frost and the splendour of the sky above. Heath, furze, grass, alike slumbered.

Shillabeer was panting with his exertions. Now very cautiously he trusted his huge body on a path winding down to the water, and presently he stood at the brink of the pool and trod the sandy beach. Crazywell was supposed to be of fabulous depth; tradition declared that all the ropes from the belfry of Walkhampton church had not plumbed it. Reuben reflected upon this story. "No call to sink so deep as that," he thought. "Please God, come presently, they'll fetch me out and let me lie beside her; not that it matters much where they put this here frame, so long as the thinking soul be joined to she. Still—till Doom—I'd like to bide with her; and I hope parson will be large-minded enough to allow it."

For some little time he walked beside the water, then suddenly addressed himself to action.

"Tis no good messing about," he said aloud. "I've got to go through the pinch, and the sooner 'tis over the better."

He took off his coat and hat, moistened his hands with his tongue, as one about to do some hard work, clenched his fists, snorted like a bull, and plunged in up to his knees. He felt his boots sinking upon the mud, but the water was still shallow. Not far distant at the edge of the pool, on the further side, a great stone rose.

"I'll drop in off that," said the man; "'twill throw me out of my depth and make a quicker job of it."

He emerged, walked round the margin of Crazywell and clambered on to the stone. Beneath it, where the water was more than four feet deep, light fell full and radiant, and made all crystal clear.

Shillabeer was about to jump when he found himself not alone. Separated from him only by the smooth surface of the pool, there appeared a fellow-creature. A woman seemed to be looking up quietly at him from beneath.

The recent past, forgotten since he had slept, turned back upon him and he remembered that Margaret Bowden

was missing on the previous night. He glared down at her now.

"Well might they fail to find you!" he said. "Poor lamb—her of all women! Whatever should take her in the water? And how long have she been there?"

He forgot his own purposes absolutely. He lowered himself into the pool until his feet were at her side. Then he drew a long breath, dived in his arms and head and groped round till he held her. A touch brought her to the surface: in the water she weighed nothing; it was only afterwards, when he dragged her out, that he found even his strength only equal to carrying her body to the bank.

How long she had been dead he knew not; but her face he found not unhappy. It was impossible to bear her single-handed to her home, and Shillabeer now climbed out of the cup and started to the adjacent farm of Kingsett. But he marked a man by the leat and he shouted to him and attracted his attention.

Twenty minutes later Simon Snell and the inn-keeper carried Margaret Bowden between them on a hurdle. Mr. Shillabeer's coat covered the corpse. They proceeded slowly and at last came in sight of "Meavy Cot."

"I'll go so far as the wicket," said Snell; "but no further. I couldn't face that chap—not with this load."

"'Tis I that have been told off for the purpose. 'Tis I that have found her, though 'pon a very different errand, I assure you. Yet not different neither, Simon, for I went to meet death; and when I looked down in the watter, there was death, sure enough, glazing up at me."

"And yet just as if she was no more than sound asleep—poor young woman—save for the blueness," said Mr. Snell.

"And so she looked, poor creature, when first I seed her. But death be the name for sleep under water."

"What was you doing up over, 'Dumpling'?"

"There again! The ways of the Lord be past finding out, Simon. My wife waiting at the golden gate—waiting and watching for the sight of a certain man—namely me—and instead this young Margaret comes along."

"My word!" said Mr. Snell. "Was you going for to make away with yourself, Mr. Shillabeer? Please don't say so, for I've had as much as I can stand this morning. I'm quivering to my innermost inwards."

"I was going to do it; but not now—not now. Abraham found a ram in a thicket, you'll remember; I find a woman in the water. The Lord works with strange tools, Snell."

"Without a doubt He do; and here's the gate. I'll take her no further. David Bowden can come out and lend a hand hisself now."

"And you'd best to let it be known far and wide," said Shillabeer. "And Doctor ought to see her, though of course no good. Still, 'tis the fashion. And crowner will sit—here's the man!"

David Bowden appeared and Simon Snell ran away. For a moment Shillabeer set himself between the dead and living.

"'Tis I found her—Madge. She's gone to glory—she's drownded herself—dead. Lord's will, David."

"Found! Thank God—where?" asked the husband. He had only heard the word "Madge."

"If you can thank God, 'tis a good thing, Bowden. 'Twas long afore I could, when this happened to me," answered the other. "Come. She's here—behind the edge of the wall. 'Twas the best I could do."

David had passed him, and when Shillabeer turned, the husband knelt beside the hurdle. A moment later he tore at the clothing of the corpse and pressed his hand over her heart.

"Us must go for doctor as a matter of form, and he's at Princetown to-day—his day there from eleven o'clock till two—so I'll traapse up over and tell him to call. And I'll ax you for a dry shirt afore I start, poor man."

"She's dead!" said Bowden.

"And cold. There's naught in all Nature so cold as them that die by drowning. But you must think of her as far ways off from here."

"Dead—dead. God help me!"

He rose to his feet and stared down.

"You take it wildly, same as I did," remarked the elder. "When my wife died, 'twas all three strong men could do to tear me off her. And when the two old women comed to do what was right, I nearly knocked their grey heads together, for I said, in my mad way, what busines had them to live to grey hairs and my wife die afore a lock was touched by time? Brown her hair—pale brown to the end. Let me help you. She'm water-logged—poor blessed creature."

Margaret Bowden was brought to her little parlour and laid upon the sofa.

David said nothing; Shillabeer maundered on.

"Like a dog on a grave you'll be, my poor David. And time's self will find it hard to travel against your heart. You'll dare him to push on. I know—I know. And to think that I'd have been back with her—my own wife—

but for this. Ess fay! Crazywell would have me if it hadn't had she. But you mustn't speak about that. One be taken and t'other left."

"She killed herself!" burst out the other man, suddenly. "Mark me—this was no accident. She took her own life—and to think that I was there calling to her and she past hearing by then."

"Yes, she went her way. She knowed, I suppose—but what did she know? Weren't she useful no more? 'Tis only failure of usefulness allows this deed."

"Useful? What have I done? God knows what I've done. 'Tisn't me—'tisn't me I tell you—there's naught between us and never was—naught but faithful love. There's another have done it—some other—and I shall never know—and her dead. Is she dead? Maybe there's a flicker in her yet, if we only knowed what to do."

"Don't distress yourself," said Shillabeer; "only Christ could raise her from the dead. I know death. She was lying like a woman asleep under the water. She's dead enough, and as a thinking man who knows trouble very close, I'll tell you for why. 'Tis along of being childless—all because she had no child."

"What folly and wickedness to think so! If I didn't mind—why should she?"

"But they all mind, and the less sense, the more they take on. It was just the same with mine; and only her large belief that God couldn't make no mistakes kept her quiet."

"Go—go!" suddenly cried David. "Who am I to bide here talking to you, and that woman dead behind the door?"

"I will go this minute—'tis natural and quite proper, poor David, that you feel like this. Break away from man you must; but don't break away from God. Kneel beside her body and pray your heart out. 'Tis the only thing will keep your brain steady. Work and pray—work like a team of hosses and pray like a team of saints. Out of kindness I say it. I'm gone—— She saved my life, mind. You must let me share the praying, for by God's grace her death kept me alive. A pity you might say, poor man, in your black misery and ignorance. But God knew which was wanted most. I must live—He only knows why; and this young lovely thing, in full joy of health and happiness, must cut her thread. 'Tis too much to expect we can understand; but we ban't expected to understand all that happens. I tell you the longest life ban't long enough to explain the way of God to man, David. Now fetch me a

wool shirt while I draw off this one. Then I be going to catch doctor. And I must look at her once more."

He went into the other room and David, having brought him a dry garment, followed him.

"A picture of a happy creature," said Reuben, as he stripped to the waist and dried his huge body. "Remember that. This be only a perishing bit of clay now, David—blue-vinnied, you see—ready to sink into earth—but Madge—a very different tale. A lovely, shining angel is she singing over our heads, along with my wife and all the good dead women. You keep that in mind and say no more cruel words against Heaven than you can help. They will out, but fight 'em down, same as I did."

A few minutes afterward Shillabeer went away; but he was still talking aloud to himself, rolling his head and waving his arms.

Then David, left alone, strove wildly for some faint sign or promise that his wife was not dead. He stripped her, fetched blankets, lighted a fire, thrust hot bricks to her feet, and strove to warm her body. Thus he laboured only that he might be doing something, and through physical exertion cheat mental torture. He knew that all efforts were vain, and presently he abandoned them, left his wife in peace, and went into the kitchen and sat down there.

Nobody came to him for some hours. Then the doctor arrived, expressed deep sympathy and promised to see those in authority. He departed in less than half-an-hour and the man was left alone again.

Two women came presently, did their office for the dead, and went away again.

Bowden's thoughts rose and fell like an ebbing and flowing sea. They wearied him and sank away, leaving his mind a drowsy blank; then, with a little rest, intellect gripped the catastrophe once more and the tide of suffering flowed and overwhelmed his spirit. He connected Rhoda with this event. The more he considered the more he suspected that something terrible must have happened between the women. He went several times to the door to look for Rhoda. But she did not come.

She had taken her nightly way with the search-parties and at dawn she was in Sheepstor. There, too weary to return home, she had gone to the wife of Charles Moses and slept in her house. For several hours they had not wakened her, but suffered her to sleep on. She rose a little before midday; and then she heard that Bartley Crocker

had left England very early on the previous morning, about the same time that her sister-in-law disappeared.

All search for Margaret had proved fruitless and news of her death did not reach Sheepstor until Rhoda left it. Several met her and asked for news, but none knew the truth. She believed now that the facts were clear and she strung herself to tell her brother what had doubtless happened.

At dusk she returned to "Meavy Cot" and found David, with his head on the kitchen table, fast asleep. Outside it was growing dark and some chained, ravenous dogs were barking loudly; inside all was silent.

David slumbered uneasily owing to his position, but his sister hesitated to wake him. First she mended the fire and made tea. She drank to fortify herself. Then she went out, fed the dogs, and loitered until darkness gathered upon the earth. Then she came in and lighted a lamp. Still her brother slept. She reviewed the words that she must speak, and then she wakened him.

Reluctantly, irritably, he returned to consciousness and stared at her.

"What the devil——?" he said; then he rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Take a dish of tea," she said. "I'm back. There's no news of her yet, but I believe——"

Slowly he began to connect his thoughts and link himself up with life again.

"I believe—I'm afraid I know—I'm almost certain I know."

"What do you know?" he asked. Then the truth returned to him in a wave that submerged him.

"My God, my God!" he cried out.

"'Tis bitter enough, but maybe the best that could have happened—for you, David."

Rhoda arrested him. She was looking straight into his face.

"Make yourself clear," he said. "What do you know—or what do you think you know? What's done be done anyway."

"'Tis done—and better done, since it had to be."

"What do you know?" he repeated harshly. "Don't beat about. How much do you know? D'you know why? What's the reason? I can't go on with my life till I know who have done it. She never did, I'll swear to that. 'Twas forced upon her from outside."

"Maybe I can't tell you more than you've found out for yourself, if you speak so," she answered. "Yet 'twas she

and only she could have done it. None else had the power to."

"Stop!" he cried out. "Don't play no more with words, if you don't want to see me go mad afore your eyes. Speak clear and tell me exactly what's in your head. I can't stand no more cloudy speeches. My mind's a frozen fog. If you've got the power to throw one ray of light, then do it. Light, I say—but there's no more light for me in this world now."

"Don't speak like that, David. Who can tell? Say nothing till time works its way. If I hurt to heal, forgive me; and if I'm wrong, I'll beg for you to forgive me. But I'm not wrong. It all joins together very straight and smooth. She's gone beyond finding, else they'd have found her by now."

"Gone beyond finding?"

"Surely. There's not a brake or pit this side of Princetown, and not a house and not a ruin that some man haven't hunted through and through for her. But they'll have to hunt the ships of the sea afore they'll find your wife that was. She's gone—she went the same time that Bartley Crocker went—to an hour. Oh, David, she's with him! Find him and you'll find her. That's the awful truth of it—clear—clear as truth can be, and 'tis the worst that have ever fallen to me that I had to tell you. But only I knew, and too well I knew through the bitter past."

He stared at her and laughed.

"What a clever woman you are—and so wonderful understanding!"

"She's happy enough, if that's anything. She's got what she played for—she's——"

His voice rose in a sudden yell.

"Leave her name alone! Don't you take her name in your mouth again or I'll silence you for evermore!"

"I'm not afraid," she answered. "I'm doing what God Almighty drives me to do. If I fail, I fail. I knew 'twas life or death. You can silence me when you please and how you please. And the sooner the better; for if you're going to hate me, I'd want to die as quick as you can put me out of the way."

"Go on," he said quietly. "I'm sorry I roared. You needn't fear me. Say what you want to say. Explain just what you think you know."

"I've said it. O' Sunday night, when I came back from Ditsworthy, I spoke out to her. I couldn't hold it in no more. 'Twas poisoning me heart and soul. I was going to tell you, but there came the boys and father's sickness

held my tongue. Then I met her—your wife with that man—Crocker—and he kissed her—God's my judge if I don't tell you truth. And that night I spoke to her and told her all I knew and all I'd seen. I'd watched them many a time—spied if you like—but only for you—only for your honour's sake. And I taxed her with it—with being untrue to you."

He put up his hand and she was silent. He struggled to master himself and succeeded for one moment more.

"And what did she answer?"

"She denied it, but——"

"And Christ will deny you, you wretch!" he thundered out. "All's clear—all's clear now! You thought to damn her; but you've damned yourself—damned your own soul through the blazing eternity of hell!"

He leapt up and she faced him without flinching.

"I know what I know," she said.

"Then know a little more than you know!"

He seized her by the wrist and dragged her into the adjoining room. It was dark. Only blankets that covered the dead made a streak of pallid light in the gloom.

"With Crocker—eh? Happy—eh? Go there! Get on your knees, murderess—look under that blanket and then ax yourself whether your carcase be fit to feed dogs!"

She realized in a moment the thing that had happened. She moved the blanket; she touched; she recoiled; but she made no sound.

"Your work—your filthy, lewd work, to drive that angel of goodness to make an end of herself. She couldn't breathe the same air with you no more. Murder, I say, if ever murder was. You—you—to think that you—behind my back—in my home—— You thrust her in the water—you held her down under it! Get out of my sight to hell—hide yourself—call the hills to cover you afore the decent world finds what you are and tears the flesh off your bones!"

He flung himself on the dust of his wife, and Rhoda went out of the room.

CHAPTER XV

NIGHT TENEBRIOUS

AIMLESS, almost mindless, Rhoda Bowden dragged herself away from the valley under Black Tor. She knew not where to turn. But there awakened no desire to escape from the tyranny of existence; she suffered rather from a mental palsy that blocked and barred every channel of thought or outlook on action.

She moved through the night-hidden valley of Meavy, and found herself presently at Sheepstor village. The place slept and she drifted among the darkened cottages, forgetting all else but the problems that now cried vainly to be solved before the coming of another day. By instinct her weary body obeyed the call of least resistance, and she sank down the hill instead of climbing upward. Mechanically she descended, as water seeks its own level, and by a footpath presently reached the bottom of the valley and stood at Marchant's Bridge, a mile under Ringmoor Down. Across that wilderness lay her nearest way home; and now it seemed to her, as she became conscious again of her vicinity and physical condition, that her goal must indeed be Ditsworthy. She was far spent and the time now approached midnight.

The hour was dark, mild, very still under a clouded moon; and for a moment, thinking upon the length of the way, Rhoda doubted her strength to reach the warrens. She drank of the river and bathed her face. Then she began the long climb upward to the Moor. Where her path left the main road and ascended easterly, through furze-brakes beside a wood, a tall grey shape, full eight feet high, stood silent by the way. It was Marchant's Cross that appeared there on her right hand underneath an ash tree; and the monument's high, squat shoulders and dim suggestion of alert and watchful humanity startled her. Then she remembered what it was, and climbed on.

At the edge of the woods reigned sleep universal, and not one of the common voices of night broke in upon it. The firs had ceased for a moment their eternal whisper; the bare boughs of oak and larch were still. The hour was breathless and so silent that the world seemed dead rather than asleep. Once only a small creature hurried

from Rhoda's path and rustled in the leaves beside her; but for the rest no cry of night bird, no bay of hound, no whinny of roaming horse broke the great peace. Only the river lifted its voice like a sigh in the dimness, but other murmur there was none. Diffused light scarcely defined away amid the black hillocks of the gorse. Earth under these conditions quite changed its contours and withheld its tones. Such colour as persisted was transformed and only the palest things—tree trunks and boulders streaked and splashed with quartz—still stood forth in the vague blur of darkness. Such obscurity and obliteration, with its hint of unseen dangers and obvious doubts, had been sinister, if not terrific, to many women; night's black hand upon the extinguished world had driven most feminine spirits even from grievous thoughts to present dread; but for Rhoda darkness was only less familiar than noonday. There existed nothing in this immanent concealment to distract her torments, and all the formless earth was distinct, clear, explicit as contrasted with the chaos of her soul.

Upon Ringmoor she came at last, and there some faint breath of air seemed to be stirring by contrast with the stagnation beneath. It touched her forehead and she sucked it in thirstily. Here the mighty spaces of the waste were faintly lighted within a little radius of the wanderer, but beyond, the naked earth rolled away into utter darkness at every side. The sky, while luminous in contrast with the world beneath it, was entirely overcast. A complete and featureless cloud without rift or rent to break its midnight monotony spread upon the firmament. Even the place of the moon might not be perceived. Below, Ringmoor soaked up the illumination to almost total extinction; above, the sombrous air hung heavy and clear, permeated evenly by lustre of the hidden moon. Only at the horizon might one perceive the immense difference between the light of earth and sky, and the large illumination spread by the one and swallowed by the other.

Ringmoor's black bosom opened for Rhoda, then shut behind her and engulfed her. Along the path, from darkness into darkness, she proceeded and bore her weight of agony through the insensible waste, as a raindrop passes over a leaf and leaves no sign. Futile shadow of a shade, she crept across the darkness and vanished beneath it; broken with the greatest suffering her spirit was built to bear, she put forth upon the void and tottered forward to the shuffle of her footsteps and the muffled drumming of her own pulse.

Night Tenebrious

She rested presently where a great stone thrust up out of night beside her way. She knew it for a friend and sank upon it now, and put her forehead against it. Here reigned such a peace as only the deaf and the desert sentinel can know—a peace beyond all experience of gregarious man—a peace impossible within any hand-wrought dwelling but the grave. There was no wind to strike sound from dry heath, or rush, or solitary stone; no water flowed near enough to send its voices hither; no rain fell to utter its whisper on earth. The silence was consummate.

Light had long since been extinguished in the few dwellings visible from Ringmoor. Trowlesworthy and Brisworthy and Ditsworthy—all were dim. No ray penetrated the sky or glowed upon the land; and night's self now began to darken, as the moon sank to her setting.

And then from afar, out of the gloom of the south, a distant beacon flashed even to this uplifted solitude; and a beam that blinked for the ships now reached one life-foundered creature, where she sat in a silence as deep, in a loneliness as vast, as the silence and the loneliness of the sea. The light was familiar to Rhoda; through wanderings and vigils in high places she had seen it many times; and she knew that it spoke of danger to the vessels and guarded them upon their ways.

Time rolled on; the earth rolled on; only this conscious fragment of life stranded here between time and earth, lay still, chained down with her load of grief and horror. Long she remained, until there stole over Ringmoor the unspeakable stupor and lifelessness of the hour before dawn. Now even creatures of night had made an end of their labours and were sleeping in holt or den; and through this trance and absolute desistance, the woman's soul still battled with its burdens and cried out to her oblivious environment.

She walked onward again and forced herself and her pangs upon the earth's suspended animation. She outraged inert Ringmoor by thus moving and suffering within its bosom, when the rule of the time was cessation and dreamless peace. She rolled unsteadily in her going, where all else was stable and motionless; she throbbed in her body and in her soul, where all else was unconscious; her dust endured the tortures of hunger and profound physical exhaustion, where nearly all other living things were filled and sleeping; her mind rose, racked to a new and higher anguish at the thought of the future, where all else was mindless and without care or grief. She considered what must follow the rising of another sun, and she longed that

she might wander and suffer here, through a moonless night, for evermore.

Again she sank to earth for a space, and again she rose and breasted the last slope which separated her from her home. Then another life made vocal utterance and complaint of fate. A dog-fox barked out of darkness, and the lonely ululation struck very loud upon the silence. To the fellow-being who heard him, his forlorn protest spoke of a creature to be envied; for he was only hungry and time would ease his want.

Among the burrows of the warren she threaded her way until, black against the night, towered Ditsworthy. And she opened the outer gate, reached the door, struck upon it and cried two words. Mournful they rose, and deep, and heavy with the weight of her torments.

"Father! Mother!"

They came down to her out of broken sleep. They found her collapsed and carried her in and roused the smouldering peat upon the hearth. Then to their questions as they crowded round her—men, women, boys, candle-lit, grotesque, hastily robed from bed—she answered slowly:

"Margaret is drowned—driven to it by me—and David have cast me out."

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